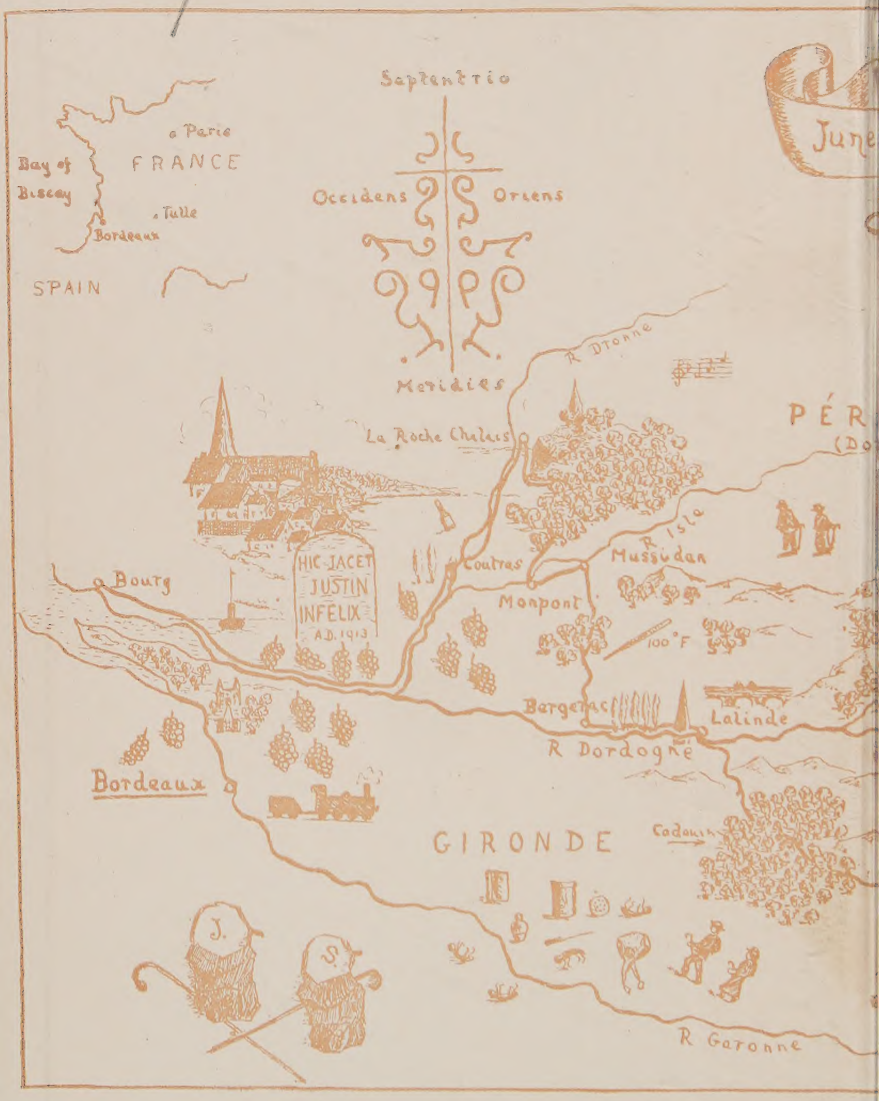
VAGABONDS IN PÉRIGORD

H·H Bashford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Bergerac
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GIRONDE
Cadouin
J.
S.
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1913.
To Paris
315 miles
R. Corrèze
Tulle
R. Doustre
Brive
Pandrigue
La Roche Canillac
CORRÈZE
R. Vézère
Argentat
Sarlat
Souillac
Beaulieu
Roc
R. Dordogne
Bretenoux
R. Cère
Loubressac
R. Bave
Calès
Rocamadour
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R. Alzou
QUERCY
(Lot)

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VAGABONDS IN PÉRIGORD

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

THE PILGRIMS' MARCH

PITY THE POOR BLIND

[*2nd Impression*

UNIFORM WITH THIS VOLUME

THE CORNER OF HARLEY STREET

[*9th Impression*

"The writer has achieved a very brilliant success."
Country Life.

"His ripe wisdom and his genial outlook on life are very attractive."—*The Daily Mail.*

"We close the book feeling that both Dr. Harding's friends and his patients are unusually fortunate people."
The Westminster Gazette.

VAGABONDS IN PÉRIGORD

BY

H. H. BASHFORD

Author of "The Corner of Harley Street."

LONDON

CONSTABLE AND COMPANY LTD.

First Published 1914.
Reissued, 1921.

TO

M. S. AND C. A. S.

AND ALL AUNTS WHO TAKE CARE

OF BABIES

In Périgord in haytime,
The larks they sing all day,
There are no city streets there,
So bitter and so grey,
But there the folk are merry,
The low-browed oxen sway,
In Périgord,
In haytime. . . .

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Vagabonds in Périgord

CHAPTER I

TULLE TO LA ROCHE CANILLAC

I

It was at eleven o'clock on Sunday, the fifteenth of June, that we left Tulle, carrying our luxuries upon our backs, and with our faces set south-east towards the upper gorges of the Dordogne. It was a day, even at that hour, of fervent heat. Our knapsacks were as yet unfamiliar to our shoulders. We were three hundred miles south of Paris, and but two days out of England. The way, for the present, at any rate, was almost totally free from shade, and the lofty hills on either side, crowned with forests as they were, only sufficed by contrast to emphasize its glare. But we had cast loose. We were *en route*. We were free. And for three golden weeks (as it

turned out) we were to set our eyes neither on city nor fellow-countryman. We were to sleep by the book in well-nigh a score of different inns; and we were to meet, in all those places, scarcely half a dozen persons who could speak even a word or two of our native tongue.

The last of England, indeed, had waved farewell to us yesterday afternoon in the brisk persons of two blue-frocked little girls, leaning out of the long train at Brive. Dear Marian and Priscilla (their Christian names had been almost the first things that they had told us), for the five hours from Vierzon, where they had been spending the night with their parents, they had done their best to make cool for us a singularly torrid journey. In recitative and duet, nay even in chorus, they had told us about their paddling-pond and their diving-pool and their new French poodle (but they would have preferred a sheep-dog) and the big coach-house, where in the autumn they were to act Peter Pan with their friends, and the French priest who came to say Mass for them once a fortnight. Together, too, in the intervals, we had learned some rather painful lessons—that in Southern France, for instance, and in mid-June, it is only wise to open the window when the herbage is standing high between the railway

lines ; and that, on a semi-corridor train, it is the easiest thing in the world to be next door to one's lunch, and yet unable to eat it. Together, also, for long minutes, we had stared out across the plains, or peeped down into the tumbling waters of the Vézère—in whose midst, once, we had discovered a boy wading, to the loud envy of five unanimous hearts.

And then they had been carried away from us, travelling south towards Toulouse ; had become a flutter of wings, a blink of sunshine, a puff of dust, had gone—with the forlorn three of us, Justin, Sophronia, and I, finally exposed, in all our English nakedness, to the full scrutiny of the platform loungers.

Nor had they failed (and we were then still a little sensitive to publicity) to drain their opportunity, as it seemed to us, to its utmost dregs. Black-gowned peasant women with flat baskets and frilled caps of lawn, gay-coloured *gendarmes*, *voyageurs de commerce* in resplendent waistcoats—from every quarter of the station, as we sat waiting for our train, their eyes had probed in us each insular idiosyncrasy. Even the old priest, pacing to and fro, reading his book, and saying his Office, had stared at us sideways out of his black eyes every time that he passed—and, when at last the

waiter, whose little table we had adopted, had given Justin's French one of its earliest opportunities, there was not an ear, surely, within range, but had visibly cocked itself to listen.

But all that had happened so long ago as yesterday; and in a country where, for ourselves, yesterday might well have been last month. So we shifted our knapsacks, eased a strap or two, and loosened down into our stride. We were still, as it were, actors in spite of ourselves—but with the stage-fright already melting before the glamour of the play. Scarcely more, too, than a couple of miles along the road there swung before us, as above the portal of our travels, the little signboard, painted in tricolour, of a café. It was at Laguenne—the first to flower for us of a hundred beautiful names. And it was called the *Café de la Belle Étoile.*

II

Now it ought to be confessed, perhaps, right away (as the burly New Yorker would have expressed it, whom we had shepherded into Paris) that although we had wandered in various guises over most of Great Britain and Romney Marsh, and though Justin in his youth had spent a couple of years in America, and once since then a few

days in the Pyrenees—yet it ought to be confessed, at the outset, that, as regarded France, we were as untravelled, almost, as three travellers could be.

Even its most popular districts—and this apparently was not one of them—were as shut books to us save upon the shelves of other people ; while this particular one had seldom, so far as we could gather, even been dusted (it could have stood that) by most of our friends.

That was the reason, no doubt, why the opening of it had seemed so fascinating an enterprise —and why each leaf, as now we turned it, hot and glistening in the sun, lay so packed for us with all the magic of adventure. That is the reason, too, why you must forgive a certain atmosphere of exaggeration from which it is a little difficult to separate the record of these first few days.

"And that is why, of course," as Sophronia remarks, "you ought *really* to be so careful before you write it down at all. Because you see——"

"?"

"Well, because to most people, you see, it must all seem so childish."

"But then everybody has been a child at some

time, even in Corrèze—and most certainly in Périgord."

"Yes, I know. But they aren't children at this minute. Nor are we. What about baby and Pandora?"

And that is quite true. For had we not left two of our very own so far behind us? Let us, therefore, doing our best, be as realistic as may be—as Justin, for instance, in those worst moments of his, when he sits down to write novels. For it is also true, alas, that never again shall we travel these roads with the same eyes—or only vicariously, when, a little older and a little stiffer, we may take Pandora there and Persephone, and probably make them carry the lunch.

The road from Tulle, then, to Laguenne threads its way southward along the valley—or so we believe, for we did not follow it—for about sixteen or seventeen miles to the little town of Argentat on the Dordogne. Seventeen miles, however, measured in England, and along what was apparently a main road, had seemed at once, for a first day's walk, a little too exacting and unadventurous. We had therefore decided, instead, for the smaller village of La Roche Canillac, at an easier distance and across country, and a convenient resting-place for the night. It was to be-

come more than that, in spite of numerous head-shakings at Tulle; and how much more it will be rather difficult to put on paper. And even already it had procured for us the perennial joy of turning aside from the highway before us, and taking a little by-road that now crept eastward out of the valley.

It was a beguiling road of curves and gleams above our heads, though a trifle peremptory, under this waxing sun, to our untrained skins and muscles; and we were not sorry when, towards the brow, it at last conducted us into the broad shade of a belt of chestnuts. Here we still climbed for a while, but under gentler conditions, and with all views save tree-vistas shut away from us; and it was about here that we met—the first persons that we had confronted—two old ladies in black, who very politely saluted us. They were the only persons, indeed, that we were to meet, actually abroad like ourselves, in almost five hours of journeying—and, throughout our travels, except possibly during a day or two in Gironde, this curious emptiness of wayfarers was always a feature of the roads. Was it the accident, merely, of our selection; or the fruit of a scarce population; or the result of hay-time and fine weather; or some innate, static quality of the remoter in-

habitants of France? We do not know. We merely state the fact. If we had sought solitude as well as sunshine, we had already found both in abundance; and about noon, having, as we judged, finally left the valley, we slipped our packs like Christian's upon the roadside moss, and lay down, and lit our pipes beside them.

For upon one thing we were all agreed—that, in spite of Justin, who is sometimes impetuous, the sense of hurry was to be strictly eliminated from our experience. Moreover, as we fondly told ourselves, it was quite clear that we must have weathered the day's intensest heat. For noon was past. We had already climbed a good many hundred feet. And, if the hours between now and nightfall held anything much more searching, we should at least meet it with well-filtered pores.

So we lay there in our shirt-sleeves, staring up through the green plumes, while Sophronia, behind a tree, reduced her apparel, and smoothed her hair. And, as we lay, we talked lazily of all those thronged impressions that had already thrust yesterday for us into so remote a distance, and the day before into an almost unbelievable past. There was our last night's dinner, for instance—it was getting near lunch-time—and, if

you are not interested in dinners, it would be as well, perhaps, to return this book to the library. For it had been a good one, the first of many, one of those wonderful three-franc dinners that seem to fall like manna upon France at seven o'clock every evening ; and it had contained trout from the Corrèze, so reluctantly unexplored by us —the little river that divides in two the single street of Tulle.

That is an exaggeration, because there are a few others, some of them no more, indeed, than steps that climb the hillside between nodding and incredibly ancient houses—and because there is also another that leads up from the white-walled town to the *École Normale de Garçons* that broods over it like a château.

Here we had climbed in the cool, after-dinner dusk to find upon its terrace—and made friends for us by the mere mention of a name—a little group of merry *savants*, with *M. le Directeur* and *Madame*, taking the air after a long day's toil. And here, too, breaking the bonds of language, for we had none of us been able to do much more than stammer commonplaces, we had been greeted with the real spirit of hospitality.

Thus their day's work had begun, we learned, at six o'clock—and that had been fifteen hours

before. But nevertheless they must show us (and they must all come, too, to warm them) every corridor and corner of their beautiful building—the laboratories, physical, chemical, and biological, the lecture-rooms and libraries, where are trained, year by year, some forty or so students to be the teachers of to-morrow's children.

All these we had seen, and the steep gardens where they are taught botany and horticulture. And we had been given handfuls to eat of succulent English cherries from a branch lowered for us by an agile German professor, who had remained pendent from it, with the kindliest grace imaginable, while its fruit was being plucked for our benefit.

From the terrace, too, as we lingered awhile before returning to our hotel, we had seen below us the whole tiny town, shadowy and shining like a pearl in its dark well of hills, and with the moon riding clear above our heads. And that had been Tulle for us, though we seldom heard a good word spoken for it in our journeyings—and then Sophronia, who never loses anything at all (in her family they never do), found that two of her safety-pins, one of them a gold one, had in some extraordinary way departed from her ; and please would we try instantly to discover their spoor ?

That delayed us, perhaps, for another quarter of an hour, though not for so long, as we remembered to our comfort, as when a camera had been similarly found to have deserted her half-way down the steepest side of Ben Lomond, and in the hottest hour of an August afternoon; or as when—but no matter, for was not this Ladignac, with the door of our first *auberge* standing ajar?

Was it the darkest, the most pungent, the most variously inhabited of all the *auberges* that we were destined to examine? In the light of experience we should all hesitate to affirm this. Yet a peep into its cavern-like gloom, illuminated as it was by the two friendly faces that now shone forth from it, convinced us of our wisdom in not having relied upon it for our *déjeuner*. Presently we should be harder. Presently we should refrain, perhaps, in the words of Justin, who likes at times to be considered a Socialist, from assuming so unwarranted a superiority. But, for the moment, though with thankful hearts we acquired some bottles of its lemonade, we were genuinely glad that we had carried our luncheon with us.

The swarthy *patron* and his *Madame* followed us out into the road.

"We did not belong to this country?"

"No. We were English."

"English—to think of that! And where then had we come from to-day?"

"From Tulle."

"Toul?"

"No, Tulle."

"A—ah *Till*—par Brive?"

"*Oui, oui.*"

"*A pied?*" incredulously.

"*Oui, oui.*"

"And *Madame* also?"

"Yes, even *Madame.*"

"Oh, *là, là!*" with little screams, and collapses, and wringings of hands.

"And for pleasure, too—*ma foi!*"—with droppings of imaginary sweat. And so farewell to Ladignac—of which we discovered, a little further on, two or three more houses and a gulf of manure, and beyond this again a road so narrow that we could easily span it with outstretched hands. This, we were assured by a very shy and white-haired boy in sabots, was the best path to Pandrigne, the next village upon our route—a path so deep that it became at times a literal tunnel through the foliage, but that led us down at last into the valley where we lunched.

III

And of Pandrigne what can we say save that it has withered for us in memory into the two blinding ladders that climbed out of it ?

They were not really ladders, and their surfaces were almost certainly flawless ; and it was our own fault, no doubt, that for a quarter of a mile we laboured in torment up the wrong one. In the oven below us, where the village lay baking, our directions had probably been explicit, in spite of the Greek chorus of little boys who jeered at our bundles from the church door. Nor were the damsels, cool as cherries under their creamy parasols, anything but kind who turned us back. So are surgeons kind, and inquisitors, who foresee the health beyond the flames. And if, at three o'clock in the afternoon of Sunday the fifteenth of June, and in the year of grace nineteen hundred and thirteen, there was a hotter place upon earth than the correct road to S. Paul—but no, there was not ; or half a league of such interminable inches ; or any hillside so impermeable to the slenderest shaft of air ; or another gradient set so vertically in the precise focus of the sun.

Pandrigne—the very syllables glowed with a lambent heat, and never, surely, as step by step

we dragged intolerably upwards, had a valley shone, as this did, with a green so anguished, or foxgloves basked at us with so glutinous a malignity. The foxgloves of Pandrigne—we shall certainly see them again in nightmares, not the sad hounds, as they have been described, of some English lane, but swaggering in crowds, with great purple cylinders, and the sleek gloaters at our *auto-da-fé*.

Imperceptibly, too, as we rose higher, the whole character of the country was changing, as though it had escaped (but only just) from the devouring furnaces below, and at the price of a permanent exhaustion. We were ascending, indeed, although we carried no ordnance map to forewarn us, upon one of those sparser stretches of tableland that are characteristic of Corrèze. The lavish crops that we had spied in the valleys were being replaced by heather and gorse. Patches of rye, anæmic and leggy, stood about wanly, surrounded by wilderness ; and the full-leaved chestnuts and acacias had changed into firs and stunted oaks. Life, too, of the larger kind, seemed to thrive here uneasily, though now and then we saw a butterfly and the half-human flight of a magpie ; and so at last, at what should have been tea-time, we stumbled thirstily into S. Paul.

It should have been tea-time—and let that stand upon a lost hour's grave—and yet to S. Paul (she pronounced it to rhyme with fowl) and the kind young woman who brought us our *petits gâteaux* and lemonade, we really owe, perhaps, much of what we found at La Roche Canillac. It was she, at any rate, who recommended an inn to us for the night. It would not be the first that we came to, or the newest. But the *monsieur* who kept it was *très gentil.* She stood surveying us with amusement ; and may all blessings rest upon her—a little slatternly, perhaps, to a too critical eye, but with the merry countenance of health and good temper.

Equally merry, too, but more reserved, as became thrifty, future housewives, were the four maidens of Chataur to whom we appealed in a difficulty. For Chataur was not upon our map, and the road out of S. Paul had terminated abruptly in a T-shaped junction without guide-posts, naked of travellers, and entirely misleading. The whole interpretation of the position lay in our mode of exit from the village. It seemed quite possible, according to the map, that we might have left it by either of two roads. Had we taken the first, a right turn now became imperative. Had we taken the second, it was equally

necessary to bear to the left. In this predicament, therefore, we left Sophronia upon a log, and, searching eastwards, happily discovered in front of a farm-house the four young ladies to whom reference has been made. These directed us with great courtesy into the right path which was straightforward, but almost immediately placed us all in a further trifling dilemma. For when we saluted, and retired to bring up Sophronia and the supplies, they rose unanimously to point out the error into which our ignorance of their language had, as they thought, betrayed us. They spoke rapidly, and each uttering different words. And in reply we could only stammer (deeply conscious of its irrelevance) that, alas, one of us was married, and *il faut chercher la femme.* They stopped abruptly, and wrinkled their foreheads, and then collapsed into laughter. A little flushed, we reappeared again with *Madame* and our several bags. Their expressions changed. They pinched our knapsacks. The spirit of bargain came to arm them. What did they contain? They would like to know. They fixed Sophronia with steadfast eyes. And what *did* they contain—what was the appropriate word for *impedimenta*, for *penates?* Once again, of malice prepense, our little language ebbed away from us. With unconscious irony,

they stared at Justin, who may only sing when in his bath. They had solved the problem. We were travelling soloists. These bags contained *chansons*—no ?

We shook our heads unanimously, but with an evasion that did not escape them. We were simply marching, we told them, *pour visiter le pays*.

" *Le pays ?* But why ? "

Justin waved his hand wearily.

" Well, why not ? Did it not seem to them a rather beautiful *pays ?* "

They looked a little dark, and then tittered, and resumed their needlework.

" *Robes de nuit*," murmured Sophronia, perhaps half a mile later.

IV

And so, in due season, and accompanied, during the last two miles of the journey, by a tiny road-side railway, we arrived at our destination. Where this railway had come from, and for what purpose, we do not know to this day. We did not see a train upon it, or any other vehicle ; and perhaps as yet it had not produced any. For, as we learned the next morning, it was only three months old.

It had become the excuse, however, for a little *gare*, and opposite this, on the Argentat road, for a small, very modern hotel. They were neither of them close to the village, hidden out of sight still in its ravine. But at the hotel we looked once or twice with hesitation. For while it did not bear the name of the *monsieur* who had been recommended to us, and while in England station hotels are usually places to be avoided, in rural France they are to be regarded with respect. That we did not stay there, however, and the next day (as we so easily might have done) follow the appointed road into Argentat, we must thank the same Heaven that spilled La Roche into its green pit above the river. For even remembering Beynac, and that this was our first night's halting-place, yet it would be hard to say that, in all our travels, we saw a lovelier village than this—each garden half supported by the crooked roof-top just below it, until the deepest dropped its petals into the rushing waters of the Doustre. And a quarter of the way down, yet still so high that the river was only a sound to it, we came suddenly on the little inn, four-square where three roads met. The pretty *bonne* who was cooking the dinner came to the kitchen's open door. Had they some bedrooms ? She looked at us doubtfully. Why,

yes, but it would be better, perhaps, if she went to find *Madame*. So she rubbed her hands upon her apron, and ran in her slippers up the street, whence presently, followed by her mistress carrying in her arms a little boy, she returned and re-entered the house.

But, of course, there were rooms, and if we would follow *Madame* into the kitchen and past the stove and between some dogs and up some stairs—yes, there were some nice rooms, two of them intercommunicating, three-quarters of a franc per room, and with the lodgers who just now occupied them perfectly willing to be moved up higher. She looked at us rather pathetically; and Sophronia patted the small boy's cheek. What was his name? His name was Maurice. And he was the only one? With an inimitable shrug, half of distress, half of humorous confession, she said that he was—*maintenant*. And it was quite obvious, indeed, that little Maurice was not to reign alone much longer.

So we took the rooms, not without qualms—but at least the new linen proved to be clean; and presently the lodgers' trousers were removed, and their romances, and we were told that it was now dinner-time. It was not a good dinner; and, in a truthful narrative, this must be recorded with

regret. But it was, at any rate, partially redeemed by the *vin rouge* that never failed us, and the bright-eyed *bonne* who had done her best to make it tempting.

After dinner, too, as we sat outside with *Monsieur* and *Madame* and little Maurice, one and another from the village drew near, and took chairs, and sat beside us. No English people, as far as they knew, had ever before spent a night there; and, as we smoked, and drank our coffee, we told each other some of the things that life had taught us—how Sophronia, for instance, could walk so far, and she a mother, and carrying a bag. Would she explain, perhaps, about her corsets? And was it herself, or merely *la vache* who had been responsible for nourishing Persephone? Look you, also, at that old man there, who had seen King Edward and even King George. No, he had not really been King George then, but the Prince of Wales and travelling incognito—and the old man, who had been a policeman, had found them both to be *bons garçons.*

The moon crept higher in a clear sky, but behind a veil of gauze, though this did not signify, they assured us, any change in the weather. And the two lodgers from round the corner threw

pieces of paper at the *mesdemoiselles*—one of them, aged sixteen, a sort of assistant *bonne ;* and her friend, daintily decked, the granddaughter of the postmistress. We were still thirsty, and offered them *sirops*, but they covered their faces, and ran away ; and we heard them laughing about us with the lodgers in the dusk behind the house.

Then the old policeman and his companions rose with grave bows, and bade us good night. The young matron, who had been so anxious about Sophronia's corsets, went to her own place, and began to play for us soft passages out of Chopin. Little Maurice was taken to bed, whither the two lodgers soon followed him ; and the river, so far below us, once more took up its parable. Two priests, also, clad in black, came out of the darkness and went into it, but saluted us with courtesy before they vanished out of sight.

Something in their passing, too, and quiet gestures reminded us again that it was Sunday ; and that all day, indeed, though we had sometimes forgotten it, we had been journeying through a temple.

CHAPTER II

LA ROCHE CANILLAC TO ARGENTAT

I

We had originally intended, after leaving La Roche Canillac, to proceed directly south along a road that apparently followed the Doustre by S. Bazile de la Roche to the town of Argentat—a distance of not more than nine or ten miles. But, on the advice of our host, who had promised to show us a short cut through the forest, we had changed our minds, and resolved instead to cross the river immediately below us, and climb the eastern side of the valley to the village of S. Martin-la-Méanne. From here, he said, if we followed the road to S. Privat, we should find ourselves led down, after a mile or two, into one of the grandest gorges of the Dordogne, beside which a track would conduct us all the way to Argentat. It would add, perhaps, another four miles to our journey, to say nothing of an extra thousand feet of climbing; but the beckoning vision of the tiny footway, curling like smoke

up the opposite heights, soon confirmed us in our overnight's resolution.

It had not been altogether a peaceful night, though uninvaded, happily, by that which we had dreaded most. Thus the bell of the *mairie*, almost next door to the open window, and of a timbre extraordinarily penetrating, had told us the quarters for some time before sleep came to overwhelm it. Little Maurice, too, who was teething in the congested fastnesses above us, had every now and then awakened the night with his cries of protest; and at half-past four, with echoing feet, the two lodgers had descended.

The gaiety of the sunlight, however, the cheerful rumours of the village, and the philosophical reflection that there had been others for whom the night had been even briefer, sent us downstairs at any rate comparatively fresh—to sour bread, it was true, and rather indifferent butter, but to great basins of steaming coffee that no English housewife could have surpassed. It was in itself bracing, too, to discover ourselves, almost immediately, in the mid-current of activities already several hours old. Thus a party of hay-makers was at wine in the breakfast-room—the simple apartment in which we had dined, and that opened by three doors respectively into the

kitchen, the street, and the stables. An ox-cart just outside was being unloaded by an ancient, barefooted man ; while the oddest caravan in the world was driven by towards S. Bazile—a sort of bathing-machine on two wheels with doors forward and aft, drawn by a mule, above whose crupper hung a small boy, and pursued by a jaded woman who might have been tramping all night. They threaded the village, children of passage like ourselves ; and while our luncheon was being prepared we sauntered across to the little post-office, where we discovered again the young lady who had been so coy with us last night. There was no trace of this in her to-day, however, beyond the recognition in her dark eyes, as she sat at needlework in the cool room behind the counter. But that she had spoken of us not too ill to her grandmother seemed implicit in the old lady's hospitality. For now, with a beautiful dignity, having sold us our stamps, she invited us to make the tour of her garden—happy post-mistress—a brimming terrace of roses, in the eye of the morning and the melting green of the mountains, and set to music by the hidden bubbling of the Doustre.

Nor were affairs pressing, we gathered, at this small outpost of communication ; for, having

wandered about the garden, and peeped down from it over the village, while a great bunch of *Maréchal Niels* was being delicately picked for us, we were invited to rest for a while in the parlour, and discuss the motives of our journey—where, if a tropical noon, already looming on the horizon, had not reminded us that we must soon be on our way, we might have spent a very comfortable morning.

It was at about ten o'clock, then, and in an air of almost windless heat, that we said good-bye to *Madame* and little Maurice and the pretty *bonne*, threading downwards, with our knapsacks, among the steep houses of the village, and with the brown river between its hay-banks rising slowly, as it were, to meet us. It was only brown as seen from afar, for, as we descended, its colours changed through olive-green to emerald, and from emerald into turquoise, until at last, upon the bridge, it had become no more than the crystal through which shone up at us the pebble and sand of its bed.

It was some little time before this, however, that we had shaken hands with our host ; and now, following his directions, we left the main road to S. Martin that wound upwards and to our left by a more devious traffic-route, and, turning

abruptly to the right, almost immediately entered the forest. Here once more, if we had needed it, we were justified of our feet, for up this path, which was half a water-course, no car or bicycle could have made its way; and we were glad enough that, for perhaps the steepest half of its ascent, it led us clambering beneath the shadow of the chestnuts.

It was not to be always so—we smelt a fox here—since from the other side we had seen it emerge; and, when we reached this point, it was to climb again into the full ardour of mid-June, and with the lizards darting from every sun-baked stone. This quiet moorland, indeed, was a true paradise of lizards; and perhaps more than that in its soft altitude of vision. It was here, at any rate, with the river dwindled again to a whisper, that we turned for a moment to bid farewell to La Roche—fair La Roche, *pas bien connu*, in spite of its three months' railway, and already half lost to us between the bending hills.

II

But we had passed now, and with a sensible rise of spirits, out of the region of even infant railways. That tiny track above La Roche had been our

terminus; and already we had set between us the steep cleft of the Doustre. Between this spot and the Auvergne border there was not another railway upon our map; and not until this evening, when we hoped to reach Argentat, should we approach (we never saw it) the single line where there was here a station. For a brief hour, too, upon these hill-tops, and in this more open country, a tempering wind was playing abroad; and presently, about a mile from S. Martin, we joined the main road marching cheerfully towards the village. It was a joyous road of no particular pretensions, looked down upon by an occasional cottage, and with its wayside crosses empty, as in a gay land they should always be—no longer the crude symbol of a merely physical procreation, or the tree of sacrifice, but the shelled husk of the Spirit.

But if S. Martin-la-Méanne could not boast itself of a *gare*, it was not to lie for ever beyond the pale of civilization; and, as we drew near it, we could hear the cries of little groups of workmen raising the poles of a brand-new telephone. They waved their hands to us, and, having saluted them, we turned aside into an *auberge*, where we bought wine for our midday meal

and made enquiries as to our road; and where, for the first time, in the ancient person of a fellow-guest, we encountered a *patois* completely unintelligible to us.

Nor was our French any more lucid to the old man, to the vast amusement of the *aubergiste* and his wife and mother, who held their sides, and kept repeating to us that he was seventy-six years old. Some little schoolgirls, too, came in to hear the duel, but stood aloof with an unwinking gravity. They were not taught English, as they informed us, in the *École Communale de Filles*, and did not express any regret at the omission. From S. Martin-la-Méanne we found that there was yet another road to Argentat taking the higher ground between the converging valleys of the Dordogne and Doustre; but, to find the track that we desired through the gorges of the bigger river, it would be necessary to ignore this, and still continue towards S. Privat.

It was now about noon, but we were among the mountains, where it was perhaps easier to resist the heat, though the road soon descended a little above a subsidiary valley. For a few minutes this was rather puzzling since we had expected to find the Dordogne here; and could not see

beyond it any hint of the real channel. But, after a mile or so, the road swung suddenly to the right, began to climb once more, and, with an almost startling abruptness, flung before us its whole soaring panorama—the great cup of its more immediate mountains, flooded with verdure and the very liquor of sunshine; the delicate brim to it of yet remoter uplands; and far down in the deep splendour of the valley the green sickle of the Dordogne herself.

It was a solemn moment. It was one of those moments that do not come often in a lifetime, and most of heaven, no doubt, had conspired in its making—and yet, as with reverence we put our burdens from off our backs, it was upon the Dordogne that we instinctively turned our eyes. Hill and sky and horizon—each stood before us a child of light; but it was the young river in her soundless beauty who queened it there, and united them in glory. It was she whom they served; and this was her virgin court. We shouldered our packs again. And she was a little stern? Well, just a little perhaps—but only with the sternness of all right-minded young women before life has beaten their swords into plough-shares. For she was still young here, though she had travelled, maybe, eighty miles

from her birthplace; and, as we descended by the slow, zigzag road, we hazarded the guess that she was about Thames' size under Hartslock Wood —an estimate, however, that we had to revise when we stood beside her, and suggesting comparisons that it would have been foolish to make. For every river has its secret soul, as all true lovers of rivers know, to be surprised as probably at first sight as after a decade of study, but, when once found, setting it apart for ever. We turned aside from the tardy road, and began to plunge downwards through the forest.

"But what *is* the soul of a river?" asked Sophronia, stumbling over a tree-root.

Justin fielded her.

"Ah, who can tell?" he said. "But, if you find it necessary to describe one river in the terms of another, then you may know that you have never found the soul of either."

We stood in the valley, a little breathless. We crossed the suspension bridge, and turned south, till the cart-road along the gorge ran out beside the water.

"And the soul of the Dordogne?"

But Justin touched his lips, and the great crests stood watching us. Only on the far side,

where the stream was swift, was the river deep enough for a swimmer. Only over there was it half a woman under its leaning banks. Here at our feet it was all girl. Sophronia slipped off her shoes and stockings. Out in mid-stream a trout rose, and left melting circles. None but the river broke the silence. Sophronia waded back to shore.

" And the soul of the Dordogne ? "

Justin lifted the wine from the watery cellar in which he had dipped it.

" It's the river ," he said, " of dead troubadours —and they've just said grace for us."

III

It was not until three o'clock that Sophronia awoke, and suggested the re-packing of our knapsacks. For our journey was by no means over, and already we had begun to realize that the miles before us would not be so easy as we had once supposed.

Deep though it was, the ravine about us was still commanded by the sun, and when, for a little while, the river ran hushed upon an even bed, there was not a leaf of all the millions that stirred by a fraction across its neighbour. The whole

valley, as it were, was holding its breath, hot and heavy with flowers, and a jealous barrier against any strange invasion. Campions of all sorts, marguerites, and forget-me-nots ; wild geraniums, lilac campanulas, and the snow-in-summer of English gardens—all these and a hundred others loaded the air through which we pushed ; and, not being botanists, we must have missed secrets at every footstep. Since we had left the suspension bridge, too, to take this path, we had not set eyes upon a single figure save that of a girl who had driven a mule past while we were eating our lunch ; and, but for a thin 'ride' down the opposite hills of felled timber, and an occasional pile of cord-wood, we saw no relics of human activity. Our feet fell muffled in the dust, yet were the noisiest moving things in the valley ; and when suddenly, through the fringe of trees, we caught sight of a boat, it was as though we beheld it against the back-cloth of a stage.

Here the hills had drawn close to one another, forcing the road again towards the river-bank ; and, almost simultaneously with the leisurely passing of the boat, we found ourselves standing upon a hot crescent of sand that dipped underwater with an irresistible appeal. We dropped our packs once more, and began to search for our

towels; and the swarthy boatman poling upstream seemed to divine our intention. Under his broad hat he was of an almost arab complexion, and he flashed his teeth at us in a comprehending smile.

"*Ça va bon*," he said, and indeed this was altogether an understatement, as the water took us into its arms, and fled away from us, and re-embraced us, and bubbled over us in rapids, and dropped beneath us into caverns.

"*Ça va bon*"—and so we were alone again in the vertical downpour of the sun, until presently, with reluctant feet, we waded back to our clothes.

We were reluctant, as well we might have been, since for ten minutes, if we had but known it, we had been cooler than we were again to be for three long nights and days—and already, even, as we resumed our passage towards Argentat, we became aware of a new sullenness in the atmosphere. It was not the ferocity that had scorched us yesterday at Pandrigne, or that vaporous oppression that was to blanch our energies to-morrow, but an opposition compounded of both. Nor were we alone, apparently, in our consciousness of its presence. The valley's languor had seemed to infect even the limbs of

its own children. Thus two barefooted, half-grown boys, sprawling at full length before a shanty, scarcely glanced up at us out of their sleepy black eyes; while, a little further on, a couple of girls and an elderly one-eyed man were only too glad to rest on their hay-forks and exchange greetings with us as we passed—their legs and arms burned to a chestnut brown, and their cheeks glowing like embers beneath their big straw hats.

Moreover our swim in the river, with its momentary stimulus to our pricking limbs, had reminded us also of an extraordinary capacity for tea—not an affair, merely, of frail porcelain and a barely visible sandwich, but a steaming tableful of viands under the benevolent tyranny of an urn. We would have such a tea, for example, as we had once shared upon the heel of Ben Ledi—a divine feast of split soda-scones, each moiety of which, having been toasted to ecstasy, and, having further been impregnated with the goldenest of butter, had then been deified with a heather-honey for which any true Highlander would have died. Or we would have a tea such as we had lingered over so many times where the two Darts meet, and where empty creels had been forgotten, nay, become filled with

imminent pounders under the wizard star of clotted cream and jam. Or we would have such a tea as had once snatched us from Denham in Buckinghamshire to Parnassus, and from a November dusk to the deathless azure of the gods. Then we tightened our belts, and, with lolling tongues, began to abate our demands. We would be content, we said, with as much less as a nursery tea of bread and scrape—that is, if the bread were only English bread of the same day's baking. Or we would be content, even, with a cup of tea and a piece of A.B.C. lunch cake. Or we would be content—but quite a long way before the end we could have wept tears into any fluid that had contained tea-leaves, even if it had been sugared in the pot before distribution.

Justin, too, who is at all times a little nervous about his health, now seized the opportunity of describing aloud many of his more poignant symptoms, and to point out the slender fuel upon which hitherto we had been working. Thus we had had no breakfast, as he now remembered, in the real sense of that holy word; and we had merely lunched upon two hard-boiled eggs, a small cheese of Rocamadour, and some of the driest bread in any conceivable existence. He was quite certain, also, that he was losing

weight as he had never lost weight before ; and Sophronia and I made little noises in our throats which he was free to interpret, if he liked, as indicative of sympathy.

For it would have been fruitless, even if it had been possible, to remind him that but for himself and the fact that it was now two hot fields away, we should long ago have slaked our thirst in the Dordogne. His eloquent warnings, however, against infection from sources unperceived, together with his then optimism as to the existence of an *auberge*, somewhere along the road, had successfully brought us to this present extremity. For we had neither seen any *auberge*, nor, during the last four or five kilometres, passed more than one solitary building.

That had been a quarter of a mile, perhaps, from the road ; and Sophronia had been anxious to throw ourselves upon its mercy. But the seemingly probable event of adding a vain half-mile to what had already become a life-long journey had held us grimly to the immediate dust. At the next bend, we told ourselves, we must certainly find a cabin of some sort—and at the next bend we had tightened our belts again, and licked what now passed for our lips, and crept once more along the bone-white road.

So four o'clock passed, and half-past four, and five; and, with the ripening hours and the increasing weight of our rücksacks, the air in which we breathed merely became sultrier and more immobile. Nor was this wholly due, as it appeared, to our locked position between the heights. For now the defile was opening out into a broad delta of quiet fields. The character of the hills, as they retreated from us, had begun temporarily to soften; and, for the moment, at any rate, we had entered a land of vines. They crept into being with increasing frequency between the wheat and rye on either side of us, and stood in glittering ranks upon the opposite hillsides.

But by this time our bags were as millstones, and it was hard for the spirit that perceives beauty to deliver its message to our preoccupied flesh. And, while it has preserved this for us, so that, looking back, we may now permanently rejoice in it, yet at the time we merely trudged on, affirming bitter resolutions—that never again would we take the road between the hot hours of twelve and four, or probe the unknown without a lemon or two in our pockets. We rehearsed again, in addition, the exact contents of our knapsacks, but could find no article in them

that could well have been omitted—until at last, as in the distance the spire of Argentat stole into view, the road swung round beside a grey handful of buildings.

They were not quite close to it. Indeed, to reach them meant a very definite excursion. But Sophronia was inexorable, and, without much hope, we turned aside. Twice we wandered round them, finding it impossible to distinguish barn from dwelling-house, and without stirring even a dog into activity ; and we were just about to give up the search when, from a distant corner, there came into sight an old, black-frocked woman.

She must have been well over sixty, but was carrying with apparent ease in each hand a brimming pailful of water, which she continued to hold as she listened to us. But she shook her head. No, she had no wine, she said ; and the milk had probably turned sour. Nor was there an *auberge* anywhere nearer than Argentat.

We illustrated our thirst and fatigue. But she could not quite understand, she said, what we meant. We were not of that part ? No, we were English. Her eyes rounded a little. She still held her pails. And we had come from La Roche Canillac ? No, she had never been there,

or to S. Martin-la-Méanne. But we had not come, surely, on foot, and with *Madame*, and in this great heat? She looked from face to face with a half-dubious, half-deprecating smile. Then would we like, perhaps, a little coffee? Coffee——? Why, we should like it better, almost, than anything else in the world. Well then, let us follow her up this ladder to her house above the stables. She carried her pails up, refusing help, and we entered the cool, dark kitchen. But, alas, there was no coffee after all, and the milk was indeed sour—would *Madame* taste it?—and no, she couldn't recommend us to drink the water. We prepared to go on. She rubbed her chin. For, about the wine—would a very *little* wine, say half a litre, be of any use to us? Only, look you, all the wine was being carefully guarded for the hay-makers. But half a litre of wine would be more than enough to re-gild our universe. So we sat down again, while she cleaned a place for us upon the dingy table. It was incredibly dark in here, even allowing for our sun-dazzled eyes, and the floor had not been scrubbed, we imagined, for at least a generation. Only up on the mantelpiece, above the cavernous fire-place, were there any evidences of a ministering care. And here, upon a brushed space, on

either side of a little Madonna, stood two glasses of fresh, white flowers.

It was now about the hour of the Angelus, and, as we took the road again by the river, the sound of bells rose in the air from the approaching spire. Here the Dordogne, too, had found its voice, and had broadened out into a little series of shallow rapids, lying close to the road but some way below it, and behind a thick screen of acacias. It was under some of these that we rested a few minutes, encouraged by the wine, but still weary ; and it was nearly seven before we entered Argentat by a very dirty lane along the eastern bank of the river.

But it was a town of beauty, lying for the most part beyond a long, modern bridge, and with a cobbled quay and narrow sloping gardens to our right and left as we crossed it. Our hotel, too, externally a rather tired-looking structure upon the main street, was yet a miracle of luxury compared with our lodgings of last night. Thus our bedroom, with an ambition that for a moment or two overwhelmed us, even vaunted those rounded corners that a good many hospital wards still lack ; and it was only the irony of fate that they should also have contained fleas. These, however, were as yet undiscovered by us, as we

moved gratefully over the parquet floors, and washed ourselves as well as might be in preparation for dinner—the first really good meal that we had eaten for two days.

Nor would it be right to leave unhonoured, before closing this chapter, even the least of all those tactful stages whereby our *bien aise* was restored to us—the delicate self-effacement of the vermicelli (surely the plumpest of their race) as they played herald to an asparagus omelette of surpassing richness; the trout that followed this, three-quarters of a pound each, and aristocrats to the last mouthful; the stew of components unknown, but never so cunningly assembled; the bowl of peas; the fillet of veal; and the two cheeses of rival lineage—and finally, the heaped dish of sweet, woodland strawberries, and the cup compounded by Justin of red wine of the country, seltzer water, and a lemon or two, with deftly inserted sugar, and drunk by us all out of great, deep-bosomed glasses to the continued prosperity of Argentat in Corrèze.

After this meal, as at La Roche, we sat outside in wicker chairs, and drank coffee, and talked for a while with one or two of our fellow-guests. But this was a town, and, though they were ready enough of speech, their tongues went clothed,

even as their legs and feet. So, after a few minutes, and still in our slippers, we went back again to the long bridge, and leaned over it, and looked down upon the stream.

It was now a night, atmospherically, of the profoundest stillness, and over the hill-tops to our left, a little lower than those of the daylight, the moon hung clear and of a golden pallor. It lent to our tobacco-smoke, hanging in air, and the white-frocked town with its dark turrets, a curious, almost spectral tranquillity, reinforced by the continual flicker behind us of summer lightning along the distant gorges. From all sides, too, like tiny tappings upon stretched parchment, rose the explosive, bizarre music of the toads. It studded the silence with an odd effect of decoration—or, as Justin put it, they made a noise like magic-lanterns.

CHAPTER III

ARGENTAT TO BEAULIEU

I

It must have been a quarter past nine when we turned back again from the bridge, and it was upon our way home that Sophronia first noticed a phenomenon that recurred often, and never failed to disturb her. For here, and at an hour when all well-brought-up English children (of whom Pandora and Persephone were very notable examples) had been long ago tubbed, and suppered, and shriven in prayer, and wrapped in dreams—at such an hour every matron in Argentat was still crawling with unbedded infants.

Pauvres petits—with nodding heads, and somnolent, fretful cries, they were being conversed across, or fed, or farmed out to elderly relatives before every little shop-front up the street. No wonder, said Sophronia, that they looked so heavy-eyed and so white; and, indeed, the very casual regard in which they seemed to hold sleep was a constant quality of all these riverside towns. For

though most of them, it was true, were as silent as the grave before ten o'clock, yet at five in the morning they had all apparently been up for hours—nor, at Argentat, at any rate, was our own night a particularly long one.

By a sad oversight, too, that might easily have budded into a catastrophe, we had left our tin of a largely advertised powder in the common kit-bag from which we had parted at Tulle, and that we should not meet again until we reached Rocamadour—a mistake, however, that was not wholly responsible for our somewhat broken slumbers. For at eleven o'clock, when we were all entrenched in that profound first sleep from which not even the intrepidest flea could have hoped for some hours to dislodge us, there drove up a muleteer, with a great ringing of bells, whose knocks upon the hotel door must have awakened the whole neighbourhood.

This was at eleven o'clock—that is to say, if the evidence could be credited of three separate tower-bells, thoughtfully synchronized not to clash ; and from this hour to one in the morning we fought with beasts at Argentat. Then came oblivion again, if an uneasy one, until at a few minutes before five a persistent vendor with a horn blew several blasts below our windows. This

would have been an effectual *réveillé* even if he had not been followed by a rival, and, at a quarter past eight, by the town-crier beating loudly upon a drum. But if the night had thus passed not wholly without adversity, and the bedrooms, in despite of their aseptic upholstering, had harboured enemies to which we were far from immune, yet once again both were purged by a morning of cloudless splendour, and further banished into insignificance by the genuine courtesy of our host.

Him we had not seen, or failed to distinguish in the dim hour of our arrival, or very probably mistaken for the *garçon ;* but to-day, with time on his hands, he became our very perfect, gentle knight—and the obvious reason to us why our friends at Tulle had recommended his hotel. He it was before whom, over our bread and coffee, we laid the problem of Sophronia's stiffness. For the distance to Beaulieu, by the winding road along the river, was somewhere about eighteen miles ; and the day promised to be even hotter than either yesterday or the day before. Moreover, there was no railway in this direction nearer than Bretenoux, twenty-two miles distant, or any village *en route* where it would have been easy to spend a night.

Under these circumstances, then, the river suggested itself as a peculiarly appropriate means of assistance, if only a boat could be found with the necessary man to bring it back again—and, for a few lazy minutes, we even contemplated the possibility of making the whole journey in this way. But it seemed that Beaulieu was even further from us by river than by road, and with rapids to be negotiated at every three or four kilometres. Moreover, the boatman whom we found presently upon the quay was a rather taciturn person with a keen eye for a bargain, and not particularly anxious, as it appeared, to make a very long trip. It would be necessary, too, as he pointed out, to take a comrade for the return voyage ; and he would not care to fetch his boat from upstream for anything less than a pound sterling.

A pound sterling, however, very nearly represented our combined expenses for twenty-four hours, and could not be thought of but as an abstract *x* from which diplomatic conversations could be begun. Our host therefore strolled away, and Justin took a photograph of some houses. Two labourers, who had paused for a moment to observe the course of events, resumed their work, as did the washerwomen just above us. The river

ran placidly. The sun poured down. The olive-skinned boatman lit a cigarette. He was a handsome fellow, well over six feet, and in the prime of life, with a sulky lip and liquid, coal-black eyes—good to look at, but not always, as we were afterwards told, '*bon garçon*,' though we should probably find him, for an hour or two, *assez agréable*.

We approached the problem from a slightly different standpoint. We were carrying bags, we said, and exploring the country. He smiled pleasantly, showing his strong, white teeth. But those bags were heavy, and the river appeared to us very beautiful. He shrugged his shoulders. "*Oh, pas mal*," he said. And so we had thought—but it was no matter—that a mile or two's lift upon it towards Beaulieu would tend to mitigate what seemed likely to be a very warm day's labour. Then our host reappeared, mellifluous, and speaking with persuasion. Justin shut up his camera, and stood at ease by Sophronia. Our host turned to us, cocking an eyebrow of enquiry. This gentleman, he said, would take us to a place for ten francs—he waved his hand—just beyond that hill there, where the river bent sharply to the right, and wherefrom our route would be '*très jolie et très, très ombrageuse*.' The boatman spat. We filled our pipes.

"And the distance to that place?"

"Perhaps five kilometres."

But we shook our heads. We would not care, we said, to spend more than six francs—for really, you see, we were quite able to walk. Our host and the boatman took up the argument again with a rapidity and accent that baffled us. Then they stopped abruptly; nodded; and the boatman swung round upon his heel. He would take us to that same point, said our host, for six francs, and at half-past eleven—and meanwhile, would we like to see, perhaps, one of the oldest houses in Argentat?

But had we not already taken up a very great deal of his time?

Oh, but no; and the *Madame*, whose house this was, would be only too rejoiced for us to see it—and, indeed, it was a very wonderful building, a grey relic of robber-baron days, and with walls at least four feet thick.

It was between these that we entered to ascend a steep flight of stairs, leading us up into a great apartment like a belfry—a towering network of innumerable, age-blackened beams, far away in which, like a small fragment of lapis lazuli, shone nested a little aperture of sky. The *Château de Visièregerie*—who could tell what long-dead calls

to arms had trembled into silence along those ancient beams ; and what might this be, so carefully wrapped in paper, hanging from the lowest of them above our heads ?

" *Un jambon ?* "

But even before we had spoken we saw how greatly we had erred.

" *Un jambon !* "

Madame threw up her hands, as did our landlord and the accompanying *bonne*.

They ran for chairs. They undid knots with an inconceivable agility.

" *Un jambon ? E—eh—mais voilà !* "

For it was nothing less than a new Osram lamp.

II

And how are we to describe this hour of luxury upon the river ?

Between the hot trampings of yesterday and Sunday and the sterner ordeal that awaited us it lay like a hammock-dream beneath Elysian branches—one Sybarite course (two would have been excessive) in that good banquet to which we had been bidden ; and for three miles, between the gliding mountains, we envied no man in or out of the Flesh.

Nor was the heat, although already there must have been thunder gathering behind it, more than a luxury, as we lay propped against our rück-sacks—our eyes resting alternately on the disappearing town and the leisurely movements of our boatman in the stern. There was no necessity, indeed, for them to be otherwise, as an occasional turn of his thick-shanked oar appeared to be all that navigation demanded ; although a less skilful pilot, as we soon discovered, would very easily have laid his craft in splinters. Even as it was, the stream being low, the continual slapping of the billows was now and then punctuated, as we sped down the rapids, by a shrewder blow from some unsuspected boulder ; and a frailer vessel than this stout, flat-bottomed boat would have fared badly enough at their hands.

Nothing occurred, however, to mar very seriously the equanimity of our steersman and his colleague ; and, having rounded the bend that shut Argentat away from us, they presently landed us in a little sandy backwater.

They had not been very talkative, it was true. But then neither had we. For a brief hour, that was all, in our separate prisons, we had slipped together down this departing water ; and for themselves they had so much more than fulfilled

their agreement as to have accompanied us across two fields to the road. So we shook hands, and, a little awkwardly, from the cup of Justin's flask, they drank wine to the unknown before us.

We were now, at about half-past twelve, between three and four miles south of Argentat, and with our faces, for the first time since we had left Tulle, turned west as well as south. With our change of direction there had crept over the country a gentler and more homely expression. The hills on either side of us lay further from the river, and were not so high ; and, while the chestnut-woods still crowned their summits, their lower slopes were embroidered with shining crops—a mosaic of white and gold and the cruder green of vines. In the valley itself, too, between the river, from which we had temporarily parted, and the road that here described a wide, unsheltered arc, every inch of the level ground lay buried beneath its produce. Uncut grass of a brooding, almost exotic aroma, interdigitated with strips and squares of heavy-eared oats and wheat—the whole lending to the little village of Saulière a sort of placid, eclectic atmosphere of wealth.

It was hardly that, perhaps, as wealth in other lands would be regarded ; and the scrupulous

harvesting of the soil, so that the very trunks of the scattered fruit trees were brushed by nodding heads of corn, bespoke, no doubt, a certain need as well as care. But it was an atmosphere, at least, of unembarrassed independence; and though the men and women who looked up at us from the potato-drills and hay-fields were working barefoot in almost every instance, they obviously did so from preference and not poverty. Upon sward and soft earth, why wear (and wear out) shoes and stockings? And for ourselves, toiling through the dust, and though we had certainly disturbed a couple of vipers, we could only echo, a little enviously, why indeed?

Fortunately, however, during these first three or four miles, which were hardly as *ombrageuse* as our landlord's optimism had suggested, the sun lay veiled behind a thin but merciful fleece of cloud; and, at a quarter to two, with the valley closing in once more, the road ran down again beside the stream. It was the hour to camp. It was an hour, also, of an almost ominous peace; and, upon a slender belt of new-mown grass, sewn with delicate silver birches, we spread out our lunch between the river and the road. For two hours, we said, or even longer, we would not stir from this spot. Never more would we take toll

of ourselves, as during the last two days, by carrying our rücksacks through the dense heat of these midday passes. We had come through tears to wisdom. We had not even forgotten to bring a lemon. At four o'clock, but not a moment sooner, would we again shoulder our packs. Nor was it our fault that the eggs and cheese and sour bread that composed our meal were so thirst-provoking that our red wine could scarcely avail to counteract them. Alternative *petits repas* were exceedingly hard to come by.

But no matter—there was our lemon; and there was Justin's flask of brandy. Moreover, at most, the village of Brivèsac could not be more than four miles distant. Having lunched, therefore, with conscious competence, we stretched ourselves at ease, and slept—even Justin, whose boast it is that an afternoon nap is quite impossible to him.

It was Justin, indeed, when at a quarter past three Sophronia awoke, and wanted to begin walking, who rebuked her with several words of solemnity. She might paddle, he said, as indeed she was doing. Or she might add a petal to Persephone's bonnet—a small garment that she carried about with her in lieu of an absent baby. Or she might regard, again, looking upstream,

that wonderful jewel of distant hills, pinned like a brooch of old enamel into the airy fabric of earth. But to take the road before four o'clock would be to fly femininely in the face of experience—to say nothing of our combined self-respect that had laid down this hour as the moment for marching. So we rested here, while Justin scribbled, and Sophronia worked or waded; and it was upon this spot that we shortly discovered the last Argentat flea—a stout fellow and implacable warrior, whom we buried with full military honours.

In the final test, however, as most philosophers and all poets would admit, it is intuition rather than experience that emerges justified; and, looking back, we could not but own that we should have been wiser to follow Sophronia. For, at four o'clock, not only was the temperature as high as ever, but upon the natural stillness of the valley air—such a stillness as we had encountered yesterday—had been imposed a new and rather dreadful quiet. It no longer resisted us. It was no longer, as it were, lord of its own being; and, through its changed medium, we saw the workers in the meadows moving mechanically or with a distorted gaiety.

Already, too, above the converging hill-tops,

the sky was flying signals of distress—had deepened in tint from the clear hues of health to a less penetrable and livider blue. It was not more than that—the gentlest pushing up behind the hills to left and right of two long wings of impalpable shade, and with the dark bend of the Dordogne, lying between, a stride nearer to us than our progress seemed to warrant.

Nor, as we quickened our pace a little, with our clothes clinging to us in the sick air, was there ever a moment when we could have pointed to a definite margin of cloud. It was as though the sky itself, by some gentle but very inexorable process, were being drawn down, and slowly robbed of colour—its blues and purples dropping by turbid degrees into an ever-broadening zone of darkness.

We were now, however, not more than a couple of miles from Brivèsac; and, though we were moving, at each step, into a deeper heart of shadow, the whole valley remained profoundly unstirred. The two wings, too, of whatever might be approaching, had not yet met, although they had drawn closer at their bases; and far behind us—in another world almost—the hills of Argentat still lay basking in a distant sunshine.

We passed a kilometre-stone, and yet another;

and in all that time—for a quarter of an hour, perhaps—there had been no visible alteration in those twin canopies above us. Then a turn of the road set us face to face with the one upon our left, and at the same moment it seemed to bulge a little and change in texture.

Ten minutes now, or at most a quarter of an hour, would have given us all the necessary respite; but, even as we spied, as in some November twilight, the last kilometre-stone between us and the village, the whole sky from meridian to hem cracked like the thin shell of a furnace. With its fracture, too, and as though there had spurted from it some unseen flood, every tree-top in the valley appeared to stagger and be carried away—translated to our vision, as regarded the forests across the river, into a curious, bleached billow of upturned leaves; and, as regarded the boughs above us, into a grotesque beating to and fro.

It was an odd spectacle, and all the odder because, a foot or two below, we ourselves were still moving in the completest calm; and twice more, but each time a little nearer, we saw that silent strip of flame above the opposite hills. Then the wind dropped again, and, in the next moment, with a burst of thunder that shook the valley,

forest and river and even the fields across the road were shut away from us in a blinding tumult of water.

III

Another half-minute, and, in spite of our capes, we should have been wet to the skin upon the open road. But in far less than that time we had climbed up beneath some trees and were huddled together under a tent of Sophronia's oil-skins. The thunder and lightning were now almost incessant—the storm that had been behind us having joined forces with the one beyond the river; and, as we sat, squatted there, peering out through the streaming veil that fell before us, we felt very small and insignificant and the least things in Nature's cosmos. Nobody would have believed that in reality we were the lords of Creation—or two of them, at least, and a lady—and for half an hour to any Impartial Observer we must have appeared the meekest rulers in existence.

Even under Tragedy's wing, however—and there is always tragedy at Thunder's shoulder—there steals Custom, candle in hand, creeping about her tasks; and presently, with the rain drumming, like some great engine, upon a single

note, we remembered our emptiness and our thirst, and Justin produced his flask. We remembered other things, too; and it was a little difficult to realize that, at this same hour, and in this same world, and but a week ago to-day, we had been sitting at tea upon the grey terrace of the House of Commons. But we made shift to divert a runnel into Justin's silver cup; and hereby record that Dordogne rain-water, flavoured with 'oily,' and tinctured with brandy, forms a beverage not to be lightly disregarded.

It sustained us, at any rate, until at six o'clock, with the evening closing and the rain unbroken, we decided to set out upon the six miles that still lay between us and Beaulieu; and indeed without it, and the black tumblers of coffee-kirsch that we drank at Brivèsac, it seems quite possible that we should not have reached Beaulieu at all. For it was here, upon the third day of our pilgrimage, that we touched the pit-bottom of that physical acclimatization which must be passed through, presumably, by most wayfarers in strange countries, and upon unusual (and as Justin asseverated) totally insufficient viands. Moreover, the temperature, far from being mitigated by the breaking of the storm, was now so additionally charged with moisture that we might have been carrying

our sacks through a hot-house—with the warm rain at once increasing both their weight and that of our clothes, and shutting away from us any cheering ray of light.

The inspiration, too, even of black coffee reinforced with liqueur proved at best to be but a waning one—a useful spur for half an hour, but not for such a task as the one in hand; and Justin's melancholy, that we were too exhausted to stem, found full play for its morbid exercise. Thus we learned from him that when really fit he intersperses pedestrianism with an occasional step-dance, whereas now his feet were like parcels wagged from his aching shoulders. Between his knees and his lower ribs, he had become entirely anæsthetic, and he could feel his vertebræ through the front of him in an appalling detail.

Nor did the prospect, a mile or so later, of a prone chestnut, felled by the storm, effect much more than a brief diversion in his gloom. For there was no reason, since it was neither solitary nor exposed, why it should not have been the one that had sheltered us; and the occasion reminded him of a friend who had invented a portable lightning-conductor, and subsequently expired in the utmost penury.

We should have to be very careful, further, as he

assured us, when we returned to England, with debilitated frames and perhaps a stone below our weights—and all this time the thin rain fell, and the fields of rye lay in beaten swathes, and we squeezed the water from our flannel trousers, and the lightning flickered and lit the greyness.

So we dragged on, with sodden boots, meeting no man, while no man passed us ; and the dinner-hour came, and went its way, and still there were no signs of approaching Beaulieu. But the anæsthesia described by Justin had by now affected us all, and we drifted forward through the valley's steam like wan souls in limbo, although in reality there is no word sufficiently weak to describe the process—its endlessness, its dolorous insipidity. Lords and a lady ? Why, we were scarcely even wisps of vapour—until . . .

IV

And then, quite suddenly, like the first cloud-flush upon an Arctic night, or a spray of song heard unbelievably in some Saharan waste, there stole upon our senses, ineffably frail—but yet there stole upon our senses the unmistakable, soft breath of strawberries. We stopped short. We lifted our eyes. And we perceived that the rain

had ceased ; that we were now in a country of a still sombre but more gracious beauty ; and that, from a by-way between the vines upon our left, an old woman had taken the road in front of us.

We could not see her face ; and she had a kerchief tightly bound about her head. But her back was the kindliest back in Europe, and upon her arm she carried a basket deliciously covered with a cloth. We caught her up, and bade her good evening. Yes, they were strawberries. She lifted the cloth. And might we have some ? Oh, but yes—let us dip our hands, and take what we wanted. With the deep humility, too, of all saints (and she ought surely to have been canonized) she refused at first to accept anything for them—a boon, however, since she was so obviously about to sell them in Beaulieu, that we could not bring ourselves to accept. We gave her threepence, therefore, for our own peace, and she heaped double handfuls upon us of new life. Nay, she did more. For, as Justin said, by that same act of divinity she lifted the meal that lay before us into another sphere of being—from the mere wilderness of the exhausted poking-in of food to the true heaven of deliberate dining.

So we came into Beaulieu in a yellow witch-light, and just as eight o'clock was being struck

from a church tower that had praised God when this was Aquitaine and English. And thanks to our strawberries, it was not without spirit that we found, and entered our hotel, where four jolly commercial travellers bade us a napkined how-do-you-do. That was all of our language that they knew, but it amply sufficed to establish relations ; and a little boy in a dark green uniform handled us gentlier than any maid. His name, he said, was Jean-Evian, and he showed us our rooms, and brought us warm water ; and would it not be well for *ces pauvres Messieurs* to have their trousers dried downstairs ?

But then *ces pauvres Messieurs*, alas, possessed no others nearer than Rocamadour ; and he shrugged his shoulders with a little smile of despair.

So we retained them, though they were to be insulated from our persons by a clever arrangement that Sophronia would explain to us—and that involved, as we afterwards discovered, the wearing of our sweaters upside down.

CHAPTER IV

BEAULIEU TO BRETENOUX

I

THIS hotel that had been recommended to us by our host at Argentat stood upon a side-street a little apart from the shriller affairs of the town; so that when we awoke next morning it was to find the clock at half-past eight, and Jean-Evian, in the yard below us, already plucking the mid-day fowl. He smiled up at us, and, even in this big room, cool and uncarpeted as it was, we could tell that the morning had already declared itself to be yet another of surpassing heat—the air standing outside our windows close and unpurged by yesterday's thunder.

We were not to walk, however, to-day further than to Bretenoux *Gare*, scarcely four miles distant on our southerly journey to Rocamadour, and where we had been assured that we should find a small but comfortable inn. And it was with a sense, therefore, of peculiar well-being that we dawdled over our *café* till nearly half-past ten. For three days we had endured hardness with

unaccustomed limbs, and had carried our bags by hill and dale for close upon fifty miles—no great distance, it was true, but, in the prevailing temperature, quite sufficient to lend repose a very satisfying *bouquet.*

So we sat at ease—we even sprawled—while Jean-Evian, in his shirt-sleeves, ran to the *boulangerie* for fresh bread, hot from the morning's oven, and his father poured us coffee as rare as any that we had tasted, and fetched us butter and apple-syrup to complete our comfort. It was a pleasant meal. It was as pleasant a meal, no doubt, as any that was possible in a country that has never learned the sacred art of breakfast; and in memory it forms the frame through which we look back upon Beaulieu—*beau lieu*, a placid *mélange* of yesterday week and the creeping centuries; forced into buttons, like little Jean-Evian, in modern shops upon shadeless pavements, but lounging happily for the most part in less exacting by-ways.

And that remains, upon the whole, our chief impression of the place—a drowsy ancient, ready to gossip with anybody, and, to tell the truth, for a spirited young creature like the Dordogne, a companion just the least bit bovine. She seemed, at any rate, to be moving round him

with an almost exaggerated sedateness, skirts down, and not a ripple upon her face—and only the washerwomen, chattering briskly over their task, may have caught a gleam, perhaps, of the different maiden underneath.

But, if Beaulieu was the least scathed of all these older, upland towns, it was admirably congruous with our mood as we squandered the morning among its streets. It loved its door-steps. And so did we. And if it loved its skin a little better, well, we also were chiefly intent at present on saving our skins as much as possible. It was with this in mind, indeed, that we returned betimes for the twelve o'clock meal at our hotel. For to-day at least, we said, we would carry no more than was absolutely essential; and, from the medical point of view, also, as Justin now pointed out to us, a really substantial *déjeuner* would be by no means harmful. During these last three days, he said, we must have destroyed a very great deal of tissue; and it was no less than our duty to restore it as quickly as possible.

Nor, as it proved, was this a duty wholly divorced from something softer. For as we entered the *salle à manger* we discovered to be present a very genial collection of fellow tissue-repairers—the quartette of last night having doubled itself in

the interval, and found its Napoleon in yet another new-comer.

This was an elderly gentleman of hearty aspect and vast *embonpoint*, well over six feet, and with the pink chaps of prosperity. It shone from him as visibly as if the fair damsel herself had been curling his moustaches and little beard before our eyes; and though our host was also present, seated next to Sophronia (the only lady, and, for a moment, a trifle overcome by the position), he assumed without question the table's head.

Moreover, apart from being thus obviously our natural leader, he was also the President, as he informed us, of a neighbouring Automobile Association—an office that rendered him all the more interested in our proposed and accomplished travels, the former of which he was good enough to re-model. He could speak some English, too, and took the occasion to interpret us at large to the company, with a running commentary upon our achievements, and those underlying, national characteristics that had made these at once so admirable and so droll. Thus, with a sweep or two of his plump hand, he commended our vigour and our courage (the cooking in some of these smaller villages being positively *affreuse*)—and notably those of the bag-carrying *Madame*.

The French ladies, it was true, did not do these things. But then each country has its customs, and he found this one very hygienic. Nor did his hospitality end in words, and, when we had retired to the verandah, he recalled us to partake of some champagne that he had just ordered.

For this was a great day, he said, in the history of two famous countries—the French President being at that moment a guest of the British population ; and ourselves, by a happy coincidence—he bowed deeply to Sophronia. So we drank to *Madame* and *ces Messieurs* in some very excellent liquor, to *La Belle France*, and Old England, and the *Entente Cordiale* between the two of them ; and all the jolly commercial travellers rose and fell in their chairs, and reached across the table and clinked glasses with us, and bade us good health and *bon voyage*. During the proceedings, too, to their great hilarity, one of the dishes was broken—the direct result, they shouted, of the foregoing *entente*, and equally symbolic with that bowl which is always broken amongst the Jews, according to an old custom, at the celebration of a marriage.

Kindly Beaulieu—two miles to the south of you we sat for some minutes, and did you homage. Less romantic than La Roche and more pastoral

than Argentat, yours was the beauty of those who war not, or stake their comfort on deep emotions. Moreover, you had planted along the roadside all the way to Bretenoux *Gare* flourishing lime trees at every so many yards.

II

It was the single line, we found, twelve years old, between Brive and Aurillac, that had become the pretext for Bretenoux *Gare*, and incidentally for a scattered colony of little houses as unromantic as Willesden Green. They were not squalid. They were even substantial. Nor were they grossly offensive. They merely stood about, congenitally blind, between the sleepy florescence of Beaulieu and the grey dignity of Bretenoux itself.

Two or three of them were either inns or cafés; amongst which, facing south towards a new and distant mountainous country, we discovered the one that had been recommended to us at Argentat. Here we ordered some coffee and a few biscuits, a little depressed by our surroundings, and at a loss, for a few minutes, as to our immediate movements.

The aspect of the weather, however,—there

were growing thunder-clouds upon every horizon —the obvious cleanliness of the hotel, and a bracing mixture in our hostess of do-as-you-like-and-be-damnedness with equal parts of good-nature all decided us to remain where we were. So we shed our packs and sipped our coffee, and presently, perceiving a small commotion at the back of the station, discovered a little tram-car about to start upon the six-mile journey to S. Céré. This would pass, also, upon its way, the old town of Bretenoux; and accordingly we strolled across, and took our places within it, obtaining from it, as we jingled along the roadside, a clearer picture of our relative surroundings.

Thus the Dordogne, we could see, had now definitely, almost for the first time since its source, turned westward upon its long journey to the sea, flowing to the north of us through the fertile plain that had opened out at Beaulieu—and with the hills that had hitherto been so close at our right hands a diminishing line upon its further side. But it was the south here that chiefly held our imagination, lifted up into various melancholy promontories, and crowned, upon its remotest height, by the solitary tower of the chapel of S. Joseph—a famous object, we were told, of pilgrimage. Equally grim, too,

and dominating the whole of the nearer country, rose the old fortress of Castelnau-Bretenoux—built upon a forest-covered hill between the valleys of the Cère and the Bave, and, for several centuries, one of the greatest castles of Europe.

It frowned down upon us now, as we bridged the Cère, and entered Bretenoux, whence our steam-tram puffed away from us with three hundred years in its pocket—and where the old château still found a certain homage in the huddled, feudal streets of the village.

They were only huddled in the sense of a nodding age and narrowness, for they had originally been drilled, apparently, like those of Winchelsea, upon an ordered plan—at right angles with and parallel to a small central square. This itself had once upon a time been a fort, but had since become the market-place, and was unoccupied at the moment save for some children playing games round a crucifix, and a caravan labelled '*Porcelaine de Limoges.*' Two or three of the streets in the immediate neighbourhood of this square were entirely roofed in by superjacent houses, lending to the whole town a peculiar, cloistral atmosphere, to which dusk and the absence of its dwellers upon the hay-fields probably contributed in equal degrees.

There were some babies left, however, crawling adventurously over the cobbles, and a few old women washing their clothes in the river ; beside which, a quarter of a mile below the bridge, we sat down for a while in the heavy evening air. The whole sky was now entirely overcast, but not with the prospect of any immediate rain ; and it was this, no doubt,—the presence of thunder in almost every direction—that kept each pool and glide so entirely unbroken. For though there were flies enough on the water, small black gnats and larger orange-quills, not a trout within sight put up his nose to receive them—and this was as obviously a trout-stream as any that we had encountered.

Through the hot nightfall we returned slowly to our hotel, disappointed of a tram that proved to be *facultatif*, and not running, and confronted at dinner with a couple of terse commercial travellers who ate loudly, but confined their speech to monosyllables. After this meal, too, as we sat outside and a little apart from the rest of the company, the sense of depression that we had experienced on arrival re-descended like a cloud upon our spirits. On this modern seat, facing the railway, and with all the world shut away from us beyond an arid house or two and

half a street like a Liverpool terrace, we might have been lodgers upon the fringe of some dismal metropolis. Nor were these people, talking lazily, and smoking cigarettes three yards away from us, much less alien here, we felt, than ourselves. The shrewd *Madame* and her pretty, powdered daughter; the two travellers with their flowered waistcoats and gold watch-chains; and the gorgeous young gentleman with languid, roving eyes, who had married the daughter, we gathered, less than a fortnight ago—they were all persons, surely, of the city, and with the city outlook upon life.

Then the young gentleman lounged towards us, and began politely to lisp in English. He had travelled, he told us, for an engineering firm over England, Canada, and the United States, and liked them well, though he always found France, and particularly Paris, gayer than any of them. It was to London, however, that he had taken his wife, who had never before been there, for their honeymoon; and they had spent three nights at the Charing Cross Hotel. He shrugged his shoulders, admitting with a smile that of course in that time she could not have seen much. But she had loved *bien*, he said, Leicestaire Square.

CHAPTER V

BRETENOUX TO ROCAMADOUR

I

It rained heavily most of the night, that was undisturbed, so far as we were concerned, by anything but the occasional passage of a train; and, when we awoke, it was to find cloud-caps upon the nearer hills, and the more distant blotted away from us altogether. It was not exactly raining, however, as we descended to breakfast, though the air was still laden with moisture and the mingled scents of garden-lilies and acacias; and, when we took the road again at ten o'clock, there were already signs, here and there, of a more favourable issue to the morning.

This was the more cheering since to-day we had resolved to reach Rocamadour, a journey that would involve, we expected, a certain amount of collar-work; and because to be belated at Bretenoux *Gare* would have been a super-tax upon our philosophy, of which we all felt a little secretly timid. So we shouldered our packs,

commending our ways to the pilgrims' God, and, passing a second time through Bretenoux proper, took the by-way that wound eastward to Prudhomac across the plain between the Cère and the old château.

Twice besieged by Henry II, and then held for a while by his rebel son ; afterwards a stronghold of the English for nearly two hundred years ; and finally the centre of plots and counterplots innumerable—it loomed above us shaggier than ever against its background of mist, though we could see, as we drew closer to it, that it had been very discreetly restored. Less than this, unhappily, was all that could be said for Prudhomac—half of which, it was true, was still a haunt of beauty, but half as crassly inappropriate to its setting as the bleakest-souled of builders could have desired.

With the mists dissolving, however, like smoke, under the steady spray of the mounting sun ; with the sound of water in our ears beyond the geranium-covered mill ; and with a multiplicity of little lanes, each a candidate for our footsteps, we were in no mood to be anything else but grateful—to the retreating storms, and the rising hills, and the freckled maiden at the cottage door who pointed out to us the right road to

Loubressac. For to-day was to be a day of by-roads all the way into Rocamadour; and these, in actuality, divided by valleys, and sprouting into unmarked branches, were very different from their counterparts on our map. Justin, indeed, who, upon similar adventures in his native land, makes rather a point of never carrying a map at all, had lodged a protest at the outset of this one, for sentimental reasons, in favour of a like abstention. But, while we had seen his point sufficiently clearly to reduce documents to a minimum—the map under discussion, a pocket dictionary and a small copy of the New Testament—there were at least two considerations (one of them only eleven months old) even more urgent than his own appetite for romance.

For though we might all, and we did not dispute it, be but voyagers into the Unmapped, of whose long journey it would be very pleasant to consider this little one symbolic—yet we were also, as he must admit, partial trustees of the Race, concerning a fraction of which it had been no less than our duty to arrange for periodical information.

That was why, as we pointed out to him, we must have a general idea of the location of certain hallowed *bureaux-de-poste*, of which that at Rocamadour chanced to be one; and especially—

Sophronia clinched the argument—with poor Persephone still labouring of teeth.

We had now finally left the plain upon a tortuous, climbing road, leading us at first south-east with the channel of the Bave upon our left—a cleft of gloom still, and dominated on the horizon by the lofty ruin of S. Laurent. Even here, however, a mellower light already stood upon the threshold; and when, next moment, the road bent round again, setting our backs to it and our faces west, the whole valley of the Dordogne below us lay surrendered to the sun.

It was a valley of fruit trees, as we had already discovered, with much of its produce—cherries, plums, and peaches—shipped directly by way of Bordeaux to England; and we had not yet climbed enough to leave their tide behind us. Thus trees prodigal with walnuts and quickly ripening greengages hung above us, and so easily within reach as to foreshadow an almost illegitimate temptation to the wayfarer of a month or two hence—unless, indeed, as seemed probable, the proportion of fruit to journeyers was such as to render the latter sufficiently welcome thieves. At every step, too, rising steadily, we came into a brisker air, and with fresh leagues of distance gradually lifting themselves into being, until at

last, as it struck noon, we reached the outskirts of Loubressac, leaning down upon what must surely have been one of the loveliest views in France.

We did not enter the village that lay at right angles to us, strung along the brim of this new tableland. But for a moment or two, turning back, we shared its glory. The whole conformation now of the country through which we had been travelling since we left Tulle lay revealed to us in an exquisite, rain-cleansed detail —the strip of plain, like a stretched garment, with the silver thread in it of the Dordogne, and beyond that fold upon fold of delicate, silken ranges, dimpled into passes, and with the deep gorges of Monday no more than a soft pleat in their midst. In the middle distance, too, or rather nearer than this, upon its velvety hummock, the castle of Bretenoux lay dwindled to a dolls'-house ; while beyond all, upon the world's brink, like a sound-wave become visible, stretched the frail outline of the mountains of Auvergne.

These we should see again on the next two days. But, as regarded Corrèze, this was our farewell. For though in reality we had left its borders yesterday afternoon, just north of Bretenoux, only now might we salute it with a properly catholic comprehension.

So we took off our hats in the crisping sun, and spiritually knelt to it, and paid it homage ; while for the next half-mile, out of the fulness of our hearts, Justin and I shared Sophronia's pack.

II

We carried her pack, and if this seems, perhaps, less generous than it might have been—the climbing being over and the road once more level—it was probably, considering the rules that bound us, the more tactful for that particular reason. For though her bag was lighter, and it was understood that we always carried the lunch, yet to bear it was her portion, and our proper attitude to recognize this. Moreover, as we pushed south towards Padirac, it became increasingly clear that for the entire absence of inns, wayside cafés, or any cottages that contained liquor, Sophronia was very largely responsible. It was she, at any rate, as we pointed out to her more than once, who had discouraged both Justin and myself in our desire to purchase wine at Prudhomac ; and it was for her sake that we had not turned aside from our journey to explore the recesses of Loubressac. Nor did the fact that she had gone back, against her own wishes, and while we smoked

our pipes, to interview some depressed women in Early High-School French—the nearest dialect at her command to the prevailing language—in any way exonerate her from the consequences of her action. The depressed women had possessed neither wine nor milk, nor offered us any hope of procuring these—and if Justin and I, perhaps, were not so thirsty as we had sometimes been, that was probably due to the abrupt change of atmosphere.

For now, with Loubressac behind us, we might have stepped, almost, into another country—a billowy plateau of wiry, mountain turf, ribbed by stone walls, and with the blue granite, on all sides, cropping out above the grass. But it was a typical road of its kind, marching between spacious borders, and with the few farmsteads elbowed away from it, on either side, into little glens or narrow, stunted plantations; and it was to one of these that we at last climbed in further search of something to drink, but only to discover, after estranging a troop of lean-flanked dogs, that it contained neither wine, nor milk, nor even recommendable water.

So we lunched dry near a place where four roads met, and where we discovered, in subsequent talk with a genial wayfarer to Padirac,

that we had tramped an unnecessary mile. Nor was this the only circumstance that conspired to add to our journey. For, when we arrived at the village where we had been told that we should find an omnibus, it was only to discover such of the inhabitants as we questioned entirely in ignorance of this vehicle's existence. If we would sit down, they said, they would enquire, while we drank our beer and lemonade; but it was their impression that, when Rocamadour wanted to come here, it hired its own carriage for the purpose. Moreover it was seldom enough, we were assured, that anybody desired to visit Padirac. The point of interest lay a mile or so to the south, where there were *gouffres*, the most wonderful in France, fully illuminated by electric light, and that could be examined, as this pamphlet would tell us, with every comfort and no fear of vertigo.

But while we had heard of the Padirac *gouffres*, and, in Mr. Barker's delightful book, read his account of them in pre-electric days, we were none of us, as it chanced, in a mood to visit them this afternoon. We were amply content, at this little table, to enjoy the peace of the village square, the kindly regards of the good grocer and his *Madame*, and the benignant interest of

an aged lady, summoned by village telepathy, who presently wavered across the cobbles to exchange a word or two with *les Anglais.*

It was here across the square, and just opposite the church, that we first witnessed the shoeing of an ox—an elaborate process that explained to us the reason of a structure whose like we had observed in several other villages. This was a pitched roof, about eight feet from the ground, supported on each side by a pair of stalwart uprights, two of them united by a horizontal beam, and the other two socketed to contain between them a rounded piece of timber, capable of being clumsily revolved by a sort of handle at one end. Between these two the ox was led beneath the shelter of the roof ; and, belly-bands being slung across from beam to beam, he was thus lifted from the ground by one or two turns of the handle—his fore-legs being bound to the anterior of the four uprights, and his hinder left free for the attentions of the smith. Two able-bodied men, in addition to the sturdy operator, appeared to be necessary for the right completion of the task, the emoluments, as we learned, of the former amounting to fourpence a hoof.

Wiser in oxen, then, if still ignorant of the

gouffres, we took the road again about three o'clock in the afternoon, leaving behind us the few pence that we had expended upon our drinks, and carrying with us the remembrance of a singularly placid half-hour. With Padirac, too, we had seemed to enter yet another stratum of country, the road conducting us almost immediately through a little forest of birch and chestnut, sheltering us from the sun, and where Sophronia's country eyes soon discovered a handsome sprinkling of strawberries.

But, if we were in the shade here, and with cool breezes straying in and out among the tree-trunks, we had to pay for it in yet a further steep ascent; and indeed for many miles this whole tableland south of the Dordogne seemed to consist of broad, parallel ranges, standing at right angles to the course of the river, and seamed by valleys more or less profound. It was from one of these, like a tacking ship, that we had ourselves now turned westward, becoming conscious thus, for the first time, of the general roll of the land, and with the blue hills, far to the north of us, beyond the Dordogne, printed once more along the horizon to our right.

Like all hills, too, and visible distances, they lent us mental wings; and, when we emerged

again from the wood upon the fine slope of open country, mapped into fields, and everywhere ripening towards harvest, it was hard to believe that we had already walked fourteen miles—or that we could be approaching anything so savage as, we had been assured, were the gorges of Rocamadour and the Ouysse. That we were indeed nearing, however, a more sophisticated region now became evident, not alone in the sudden appearance of a sort of taxi-cab, bearing an obvious sightseer to the Padirac caves, but a little later in the several fashionable hotels that proved to be the pride of the next village of Alvignac. This, we learned, was a place noted for its mineral waters that were advised by many eminent physicians as particularly appropriate to an equal number of complaints; and where we were informed by the kindly lady who gave us our afternoon coffee that an Englishman had recently stayed for a month.

She told us also that, at about five, the village postman would be glad to give us a lift in his cart as far as Rocamadour *Gare;* and meanwhile showed us some postcards, with a gently humorous smile, illustrating the effects of the local mineral water. These were so unexpectedly realistic that Sophronia, to whom they were given, did

not grasp at first their exact significance; and in the next, our very hospitable hostess had submerged them with a polite apology. She had forgotten, she said, that we were English, and probably unused to these things.

But though we were English, when she had gone, we began to study them again dispassionately, as throwing a possible lantern-ray into an alleged racial gulf. It could not be more than that. And it was perhaps hardly a gulf. Let us call it the bar, rather, to which we summoned, for a moment, both our hostess and ourselves.

"And as a matter of fact," said Justin, "though we dislike it, it is only a very venial example of an excessive reaction from official prudery."

"And what's that exactly?" asked Sophronia, who is always suspicious of Justin's rhetoric.

He leaned back a little in his chair, and, feeling in good health, gave himself rein.

"Why, the sort of prudery," he explained, "half Semitic and half clerical, that sees the common and unclean in most wholesome bodily functions; the sort of prudery that writes to *The Times* if women don't dress themselves like bags, or train their skins to take the air as Nature and Nature's God intended."

"And these," I said, picking up the cards,

"these are to be considered the healthy contrast?"

"No, not healthy," protested Justin, "because no excess can ever be that—but at least saner and more cleanly than the so-called modesty opposed to it."

"But why, then, if that is so," pursued Sophronia, "did the woman smile like that when she handed them to us?"

"Why, because, of course," said Justin, "she is only herself half free; because she knows that three-quarters of us, even in France, are still in gaol; because no well-brought-up young human must be taught the truth about his temple—where it came from, how to keep it, and its chief physical responsibilities; and because, in consequence, for the larger number of us, there still clings about it the veil that was first lifted for us with a half-guilty snigger—or approached (which was even worse) on a sort of ponderous, though well-meant, but essentially indecent, religious tip-toe."

He drank some coffee.

"And in Papua," he added, "the beastly things would be unsaleable."

"But not in England?"

"No—only in England they'd be sold under

the counter. That's why I take my hat off to *Madame*."

"And you don't think, then, that we gain anything by our—official—er—reticence?"

Justin lit a match, and regarded Sophronia with a frown.

"Well, I think we gain," he said, "by precisely as much as an atmosphere of spurious chastity is to be preferred to its equally spurious reverse. Neither is real. Both are the products, chiefly, of towns. And probably the latter is the more honest of the two—merely the flag-wagging (though of a rather dangerous flag) common to every ardent and recently liberated temperament."

Sophronia yawned a little and, as he was nearer to her, felt for Justin's watch.

"And the mean, you think," she said tactfully, "lies somewhere between the two?"

It was a safe remark, and Justin nodded.

"In the happy day," he said, "when we shall teach our children the ordinary truths about their tenements along with the exports of Catalonia and Peru."

"And meanwhile, you don't suppose, do you, that the postman can have started?"

But he had, alas, and that was the penultimate nail in our private coffin for Alvignac—the las

consisting of three corpulent mineral-water-drinkers, admirably dressed, and who did not hesitate to borrow us for their prolonged and united inspection.

But if Alvignac could thus support, though a trifle anxiously, all these new hotels, and was described as a place of beauty and justly increasing renown, what then were we to discover at Rocamadour itself ?

We debated the question a little gloomily on the three-mile descent to the station, where we found our kit-bag—a warming circumstance—but where we were greeted once more with a garish café and other outposts of notoriety. Nor were we reassured, after taking our seats in the hotel bus that chanced to be waiting, when this proceeded with infinite leisure to re-ascend upon the plain. For though Rocamadour, as we knew, still lay a mile or so to the west, the thin-soiled country that surrounded us stretched as far as our eyes could see. Once again, too, as we jogged along, it had changed its garments, and now lay spread before us in a monotony of tiny, stone-walled pastures.

And Rocamadour ? With sinking hearts we stared about us through the window. Rocamadour ? Well, we had eaten its cheese, and

hoped in its post-office to find good news; but as for itself—and then, even as we doubted, the earth and its centuries cracked beneath us; and we were peering down, over our screaming brakes, upon the strangest shrine in Christendom.

III

Vallis tenebrosa—perhaps six hundred feet below us its steep sides met in the dried bed of the Alzou, beside whose trickle of pebbles, in Lilliputian fields, small black figures were putting up the hay. *Vallis tenebrosa*, the dark valley of wild beasts and shades, so it had emerged from the mists before French history began to be written; and already, as we crept down into it, a little south of the town, the dew of its mystery was upon us, as it must have fallen upon so many. Only by describing long loops, and even at one spot through a tunnel, was it possible for the road to make a reasonable descent, with the little bus facing alternately the narrowing head of the defile, and the grim profile of the town against its eastern side.

Higher and higher, as we approached it, this began to tower above us, fashioned as impossibly out of the very bone of the valley as the cleft

itself, a quarter of an hour ago, had lain concealed in the uplands before us. Château and chapel and hotels, and the humbler tiers of cottages, they stood moulded from the precipice, each the child, probably, in a town so scarred, of some earlier and crumbled structure, but none—even the most recent—uncaptured by the spell that still walls Rocamadour from the world.

Wherein this lies, apart from the travails of thirteen hundred years—the emanation of what remoter vigils—who shall say, but that it is there and must have had some origin; and that S. Amadour, that shrivelled hermit with the ardent name, would be hardly less wonderful as some poem of men's minds than in the flesh with which legend has endowed him. He was no other, indeed, as tradition has it, than that same Zacchæus who climbed up into the sycamore to see the son of God, and who wandered here into the wilderness from a Christian mission at Bordeaux to contemplate the miracle of the Virgin and her Christ.

Nor can the high austerity of that primal motive have ever been wholly effaced here by the passions that succeeded it. Blood-lust and chicanery and blind, faded frenzies, they have all beaten against, and possessed, and written

their anguish upon these stones. Hallowed and bombarded by kings, and worn smooth by pilgrims, they have been pillaged in turn by rebels, Huguenots, and Jacobins. But now the kings and the princes and the pillagers are dead, and the merchants prefer Lourdes, and they have emerged again from the welter—a little greyer, perhaps, and world-wearier, but still of the earth non-earthly, and with their first ordination valid.

So they stood above us, as presently we climbed the many steps to our hotel—a large building, scrupulously clean, and of which we were the only guests; and it was upon one of them, no doubt, that the little terrace was supported where we rested after dinner, and discussed our letters. These had described, in fact, very little beyond the babies' arrival in Wiltshire; but in the stop-press column of Justin's paper the latest news had been presented to us—Middlesex having made, it appeared, 191 for 5, and Hendren 45 not out . . .

An hour later, from our bedroom window, Sophronia and I leaned out. It was very quiet, far more quiet, indeed, than any resting-place that we had yet found; and the valley lay filled with a profound, soft darkness. This was not

broken even with a light, for so steeply was the town set that the rose-covered pergola just below us hid the roof-tops a hundred feet down—even as those, in their turn, concealed the street below them, and all but a segment or two of the tree-tops below that. Deepest of all only, as though still lit with the sluggish dregs of day, there shone up at us the dead stones of the river—thrust yet deeper, perhaps, into the ravine by these gathering shades, that at the same time had seemed to narrow its span.

So we undressed, and under our candle re-read the story of Zacchæus. Once before he had not been able to see Jesus for the press. Had he resolved never again to run the risk? And what did it matter that a learned Jesuit historian had proved with evidence that he never came here at all? For lo now, and for us also, was a miracle being wrought, as the moon uplifted herself above the opposite crest. Slowly she rose, with spreading arms, until we could almost hear it fall—that myriad, invisible rain with which she pierced the night. Then, as earth caught it, it grew into sight like gathering frost on the outlying places, or began to rise up like incense from the warmer depths of the valley.

CHAPTER VI

ROCAMADOUR TO PAYRAC

I

During the seasons of pilgrimage, and especially in May and September, Rocamadour is probably full to overflowing, although in present times the pilgrims are almost wholly of local origin, and do not come here, as to Lourdes, from every quarter of the world.

On this June morning, however, as we took our breakfast in a pool of sunshine on the terrace, it was in a town that seemed scarcely half inhabited. The bus that, while we slept, had taken our kit-bag to the station, had not brought back with it any fresh visitors. And, as we looked down over the blue-grey roofs, we might have been in a city, almost, of the dead—or of a creeping handful of wrinkled old women.

So we breakfasted alone; and, after considering circumstances and the map, decided to make for the village of Payrac, due west of us, and, as the crow might fly, not further, perhaps, than

nine or ten miles. Why precisely we decided for Payrac, it would have been a little hard to say, but probably—such is human perversity—because nobody at Rocamadour could be persuaded to speak of it with enthusiasm. On the other hand, neither our host nor the *bonne* nor the gentle soul who presently showed us over the château had ever personally been near the place; it was not mentioned in any of the hotel guide-books; it lay far from even a single line of railway; and we liked the name of it—all foolish reasons, but whose combination, as we now recollected, had led us to La Roche Canillac. So we packed our bags, and while our *petit repas* was being prepared, climbed up, past the stations of the Cross, to the old fortress at the summit of the rock.

It was a steep climb, and particularly so with several steeper in front of us, but it melted presently into one of the views of the world, with a benign glimpse, behind those frowning bastions, into the most romantic of theological seminaries. It might not have been that exactly, and for perfection it needed an English lawn. But it possessed a rose garden, and was the permanent home, we learned, of eight fortunate priests who returned thither, winter by winter, for purposes of study and devotion, but spent each summer in

conducting missions to less favoured regions. From the battlements, too, above this garden, we obtained a picture of the surrounding country that, in view of the wide detour of the roads and the sinuous gorges of the Alzou and Ouysse, afterwards saved us a certain amount of wandering.

Bidding farewell, then, to what had proved, from the material standpoint, the most satisfying of all our lodgings, it was down the valley of the Alzou that we set out about eleven, and upon a road that soon became no more than a pebbly track by the stream-bed. In times of spate, indeed, it must itself have been for days under water, as had most of the strips—they were hardly fields—of uncut grass, wedged here between the Alzou and the narrowing walls of the ravine. These were steepest on our right—precipitous screes of loose granite, such as those of Cumberland and Westmorland, but webbed at their base with a delicate growth of convolvulus, and studded with mint and stone-crop and many flowers that we did not know.

Not even a goat here could have found foothold or, finding it, any sustenance ; but from the opposite side where the cliff slanted a little more generously came the odd note, like the dropping of water in a grotto, of an occasional bell or two

somewhere half-way up. Butterflies also were abundant, a small blue one predominating, but with clouded yellows and painted ladies, and, upon one particular stone, a lemon-winged giant of so proud a beauty that we all stood round him with open mouths.

But if we walked through these wonders so far consciously blind as to deplore the still-born naturalists within us, yet we were all aware to-day of a curious psychical change—not so much the return to or the re-occupation of our ordinary, everyday personalities as their re-adjustment to the pageant about us.

For nearly a week now we had been players, as it were, in a masque ; and though, from time to time, as upon leaving Tulle, we had recognized this, we had never succeeded quite in escaping from the rôle. It was not unnatural. It is the common experience of every holiday-maker even at Southend. And if its invasion had been a little completer and more prolonged than usual, this was the fruit, no doubt, of the abrupt change both of scene and habit, the tropical sunshine, and the instantly arising necessity of converting our thoughts into an unfamiliar tongue. Thus our commonest chatter of the wayside had been spoken, in a sense, after

rehearsal; and the cumulative effect had been histrionic in spite of ourselves.

But now, almost suddenly, this phase of our journey had ebbed away from us—at the touch, perhaps, of these letters still cherished in our pockets; those trivial intimacies that had spanned the leagues between Pewsey Vale and Rocamadour; the reviews that somebody had sent him of Justin's latest ethical study (and that united in explaining to him how obscure this was and indecent); and the two or three professional communications that had been forwarded to Sophronia's husband. They had none of them been important. But they had at least coincided with a change of vision; and, as the little track that we were upon now bridged the river, we knew that Act I lay behind us.

II

It bridged the river, but when we had climbed the opposite side we could see, looking down, that it had in reality divided into two; and that very probably—we had but half understood our instructions—we ought to have pursued its other half down below us. We were on high, however, upon the back of a great rolling divide. The

wind was merry, and to our left, immediately west of us, lay a deeper channel, heavily wooded upon its further side, and containing, we supposed, the dark waters of the Ouysse.

There was no other river, at any rate, recorded upon our map. We had to cross it at some point in order to reach Payrac and our more immediate objective, the village of Calès. And at the pleasant worst, if we followed it down-stream, we should merely find ourselves conducted back to the Dordogne.

But it was a desolate region, with this shaly upland gradually transforming itself into forest, and lifting itself, upon our right, into a bald summit high above us. Our track, too, as the stunted oaks began to thicken upon all sides, broke up into innumerable tiny pathways of chipped granite, while the river below us, a chocolate-brown from the rain of two nights ago, showed no signs, in its tortuous flow, of any ford or bridge.

We could not be wrong, however, as several times we explained to Justin, whose view it was that we should have kept to the original valley; and, though we might possibly have been more right, this was a fine gorge to have traversed, and one that revealed to us, about two miles

further on, a solitary mill upon the water's edge. It was the first human habitation—if indeed it were one—that we had set eyes upon since leaving Rocamadour; and, although at first it did not present to us any evidences of life, an exploration of its interior presently discovered two women. Both of them were thin and very swarthy and at some manual labour, and too physically tired to be in the least inquisitive. But they told us briefly that there was a bridge about half a mile further on, and that the road to Payrac through Calès was that steep one yonder.

We looked up, and perceived a gleam upon the opposite declivity. From its direction it would seem that, having crossed the Ouysse, we must then proceed to retrace our steps above its further bank. Moreover it was now past one o'clock; the valley was oppressive; we must have travelled at least six miles; and Justin was becoming a little bitter.

Thus, as he had so frequently pointed out, it was always a hazardous policy to attempt a short cut in an unknown country. It was the safest of rules, at any rate, as he personally had not forgotten, never to do so under circumstances like the present; while, in spite of the fact that this was to have been a short

day's work, we had already laboured round three sides of a triangle, and with every prospect of having to do it again backwards. Nor was this all, for when, in a moment or two, we debouched upon a hard road with a guide-post, we were assured that by the highway, whose circuitousness we had been avoiding, Rocamadour was less than four miles distant.

So we leaned morosely over the bridge, with the great cliffs upon every side, and it was perhaps Sophronia who first discovered, peering calmly down upon us, the tall chapel of what must surely be Calès. We stared up at it, rubbing our eyes. For not only was it nodding there where we had least expected it, but the road by which we were supposed to reach it was now vanishing indefinitely in precisely the opposite direction. It was one of those moments of topographical surprise that may affect even the most phlegmatic of explorers; and it contained elements almost equally disturbing. For, although the valley's walls were of the deceptive steepness that may so easily become a precipice round every corner, yet there was undoubtedly the beginning of a sort of path—if only Justin——

But while there are times, as has been hinted, when Justin is inclined to be impetuous, there

are many others, as the woman who knows him best would testify, when his caution becomes well-nigh intolerable. And we had to admit that, at the present moment, his position was a peculiarly strong one. Even Justin, however, appeared to flinch a little from turning his back on a visible goal with nearly a mile of hot road stretching away from it before him ; and, at that moment, there happily emerged from the defile through which we should have passed a small black omnibus full of elderly women.

These were asleep, as were the horse, and the driver upon the box. But a little boy with a cropped head assured us that the tower was indeed that of Calès ; and, after we had settled to our lunch, came running back to address us. Everybody in the cart, he said, would be so pleased if we would care to join them. It was not many miles to Calès, and they could easily make room for us. He stood below us in his dark smock like a small Dominican. And he bent his head with a grand courtesy when we assured him that we preferred walking. It was a grotesque preference, and expressed, no doubt, in an accent equally strange ; but neither his face nor his voice betrayed the least consciousness of this. We merely thanked one another for our polite-

ness, and he ran back again after the omnibus. Are there such boys in England ? It is at least pleasant to believe so, and his *bonhomie* proved the solvent of our differences. For, with Calès identified and luncheon inside him, Justin professed himself willing to accept risks ; and when, five hundred feet later, we scrambled out again upon the tableland it was to find the village scarcely a mile away from us.

A windy church, a row of cottages, and a faded château with patrician gates—it rode upon a billow rather higher than the one on which we stood, and was separated from us by a trough of slaty, sparkling downland. In sudden contrast, too, to the smaller movements of the valleys, the whole world here seemed to be swinging with a leisurely, spacious freedom. Our path ran out upon it, and was swallowed up. Rocamadour had dropped back again underground; and the strip of sky that up to now had been our proprietary heaven had become lost in a vast, equable ocean.

So we struck across country, climbing over walls, and threading a silver copse. From far away somewhere—we could not see him—a boy shouted to us in a shrill voice ; and, above our heads, lazy shoals of cumulus plunged slowly be-

fore the freshening breeze. There was something bracing even about this hamlet's very name—as though the sea, it stood so high, had somehow crept into its syllables; and, as each wave-top may in turn become the ocean's summit, so, for a moment, as we stood in Calès, we seemed to dominate the arena—the shadow and glitter of these nearer uplands, the rippling hill-tops on the other side of the Dordogne, and the fainter domes to the north-east of Auvergne.

But it was only for a moment, and then in the next the sun had toppled behind a cloud, and we were slanting down towards Payrac into as dismal a valley as we had seen. It was hardly a valley so much as a depression or confluence of utterly barren depressions, dotted with junipers, and bathed in an air so chilly that we buttoned up our coats, and began to think about our sweaters. Even Sophronia, so usually unmoved, was now depressed about the future, the sort of food that we should find at Payrac, and the probable virulence of its fleas. She recalled the expressions of our host when he had first heard of our intention, the movements of his hands, and all that lay behind his professed ignorance of Payrac's inns. Nor was the country, as we proceeded, at any pains to reassure us. The sepia-tinted earth lay

as solitary as if a plague had swept it; and, indeed, if we excluded Calès, where some little boys had been playing skittles, we had met but two women and three children and a cart since we had left Rocamadour at eleven.

It was this consideration, perhaps, that, a mile further on, filled us with so friendly a sentiment for two sour-visaged persons whose dog chased us for a hundred yards. For he did not eat us, and ten minutes later our road bent suddenly into the forest, climbing up again through a gentler and more entangled air towards the squat spire of Payrac church.

III

But if this region between Calès and Payrac had thus appeared to be practically depopulated, Payrac itself, or at any rate its northern end, was now humming with a surprising traffic. On either side of the broad road along which it was strung, empty brakes stood about behind patient horses, while between them, pivoting on the inn, moved groups of serious men and women and a larger regiment of children carrying flags. It was the latter, indeed, that suggested to us the possibility of a fête, since, for the rest, the prevailing colour was so markedly sombre, and there were

such few evidences of gaiety apart from that connected with food—its anticipation, consumption, or digestion—that they might quite reasonably have just returned from a funeral. And, in fact, the occasion, as we learned, was not devoid of a certain gravity. For when we approached, a little diffidently, and the observed of every eye, it was to be told by the son of the house that this was a '*Certificat d'études*'—not the actual document, we were to understand, but the celebration of its award. It marked a critical period, we were assured, in the life of *les jeunes*, and was the object of an examination in the *Écoles Communales* to which every child, or so we understood, was submitted at the age of twelve, and that marked the climax for many of their scholastic career.

But, while the young man, himself a graduate and embryo professor, was infinitely patient in his efforts to enlighten us, and while there are probably many Englishmen who really understand these things—the exact relations of the *Écoles Communales*, *Écoles Supérieures*, *Écoles Normales*, and *Lycées*—we must still own ourselves outside the pale. It was not his fault. For later in the evening, after he had finished waiting at table, he re-explained to us in broken English the whole com-

plicated system; and even now, harassed as he was, and with the sweat standing upon his forehead, he was only too willing, as we saw, to answer all our questions. Meanwhile, however, his mother, a dark-eyed woman hot from the kitchen, was hard put to it, even with the help of various older women and her daughter, to keep the tables in the *salle à manger* satisfactorily furnished—and if we would excuse him?

We took a corner, therefore, in the long, low-ceilinged room, where already two tables were occupied by eclectic diners—sunburnt teachers in stiff clothes, with the hands and wrists of peasants—and where a third was being laid for a detachment of the outside children. These were even now crowding in at the doorway and being marshalled to their places, the girls facing us, but the boys in no wise deterred by their position from inspecting every detail of our persons.

Nor did the chicken, red wine, and bread, their third meal, as we were told, since noon, deter them from keeping an eye upon our movements. We had been 'thrown in,' as it were, unexpectedly among their day's entertainments, and they did not intend to be half-hearted in their enjoyment of us. For they were not children of Payrac—these were hovering upon their outskirts

—but had driven over from a village called Fajole, whither they were returning after tea, and whose beauties, when we had become intimate, they very cordially recommended to our notice. This was not an intimacy, however, like any other valuable thing, to be commanded or at all easily conferred ; and, for fully five minutes, as we sat outside smoking our pipes upon a bench, we were hemmed in by a solemn crescent of inquisitors. They stood so close that, if we had leaned forward, we could have touched their Sunday buttons. But no remarks that we made appeared to register themselves on their minds, while their elders, of whom one or two stood a little consciously in the offing, contributed nothing but their presence to the occasion. So we relapsed into silence until something between us appeared to vanish, and we were chattering there like starlings of the various things that we knew. One little girl, even, from an *École Supérieure*, and quite aware of it, replied to us in a graceful word or two of English. Her name, she said, was Madeleine de Salignac ; and she gave us to understand that she stood rather apart from the others.

On the other hand, nowhere in our travels did we find democracy more happily incarnate than in our little professor who emerged smiling from

the scullery, and whom we consulted as to our lodging for the night. For the day was now visibly waning. Already there had been a spit or two of rain. And though Sophronia's glimpse of the kitchen had rather unmanned her, Souillac, the next town of any size, was not less than ten miles away. Nor were the best bedrooms, built out in a wing above the stables, and approached from the street by a separate staircase, evocative of any great enthusiasm—or, at any rate, until we had seen the others. But there was the professor's smile, his entire absence of intellectual conceit, and the reasonable deduction that his mother must be a very nice mother; while, as we pointed out to her, upon the chest of drawers there stood a bust of Jeanne d'Arc to remind Sophronia of what a woman had endured.

With this matter settled, also, and having been accepted by the children of Fajole, we seemed to have been surrounded by a growing aura of friendliness. It was as though, during our absence upstairs, the freedom of Payrac had been conferred upon us. Its gendarmes greeted us as brethren and Sophronia as a sister. Its grocer, kindliest member of an essentially kind profession, sold us *dragées* of a flawless integrity. These in England would have been called, we think,

sugared almonds; and among the children of Payrac, those of Fajole having departed, they proved to be exceedingly popular. Then, with these distributed, we explored the village, sometimes with an escort and sometimes alone; and if our dinner, as was to be expected from so exhausted a hospitality, was an affair rather of shreds and patches, it was at least taken *en famille*—the professor and a bilious uncle sharing it dish by dish, and the mother and daughter taking turns to wait upon us. In none of these inns, indeed, although frequently the father and sons would sit down with us, did the women ever come to table; and, when to-night we sat outside upon forms and chairs round the kitchen door, they still remained shadowy figures in the background.

The wind had now dropped, and, though we were so high, the air had grown soft and warm; and, having lit our pipes, we invited the company to be our guests. It was a very simple entertainment costing us no more, as we found, than four francs; but it drew us together there for an hour or two, a sufficiently assorted group—the little professor with his pink cheeks and town clothes and white collar; a tall man next to him, dressed in black, and with a battered straw hat pulled over his eyes; and beyond him again a mouse-

coloured stranger, two elderly women, and the uncle. These were all sitting against the house, with the mother and daughter, who would not drink anything, leaning, from time to time, a little wearily in the doorway; and the circle was completed on our right by a farm labourer tilting his chair, and loudly voluble upon every subject broached.

So we sat and talked there, and made little jokes, and presently a lamp was set upon the table, casting strange shadows upon us, and altering the colours in our glasses. By its light, too, beyond this ring, we could see an outer one of blue-frocked children, listening like mice, and drawn like moths from the darkness.

CHAPTER VII

PAYRAC TO SOUILLAC

I

Had we been less tired; had we been sped to rest with a less friendly good-night; had Joan of Arc been less palely indomitable; this might have lived, perhaps, in our memories as the least comfortable night that we had known. But to a certain extent we had been forewarned. We had enjoyed a night's luxury at Rocamadour. And, apart from an undeniably stormy hour between one and two in the morning, Justin and I, at any rate, slept better than we had anticipated. Even for Sophronia, belonging as she did to the unhappier sex that cannot tuck its pyjamas into its socks, the invasion, she declared, was less severe than it might have been, though she had suffered, as did we all, from a species of hay-fever caused by the pollen-laden air and the fine dust from our quilts. This latter, indeed, the dust of ages, superadded to the poignancy of the stables, was of a peculiarly penetrating quality; and, though we had hidden the quilts themselves

in the remotest corner available, it brooded above us, a pillar of cloud, all night.

Joan of Arc, however, or perhaps S. Pierre, the patron saint of Payrac, must have intervened at last in our favour; for, when we awoke at seven, it was to find that we had slept for five hours, and to forget the warfare of the night in an early start upon the road.

Once again it was a day, we found, of wind and sun, the former fresh from the north, to which our faces were now turned, and pushing before it great fleets of cloud. It blew into our lungs and minds, and if, for the first three miles or so of our journey, we discoursed gravely enough of insecticides, this was doubtless to remind ourselves that we were still walking upon earth, and were not arthropods, as we easily might have been, on the limpid floor of some aerial sea.

Nor could it be denied, as we swung along, that the prospect of lunch at Souillac, where we proposed, after a morning's tramp, to consider our day's work at an end, lent a certain amount of vigour to our steps. And it would be almost incredible, looking back, if history were not teeming with such incidents, to reflect that actually we did not crawl into it until somewhere between four and five.

But, alas, as somebody has wisely said, the only thing that we do not learn from is experience; and when, an hour out of Payrac, upon an excellent main road, we remembered and tried to discover the ancient route to Souillac, even Justin appeared to have forgotten his own aphorisms of yesterday. Moreover, the description of this older track that the professor had given us before we started had been so explicit that we could not surely be wrong. There was the white house *en face*. Here was the great curve *à droite*. And who could doubt but that there, across the down, lay the print of that earlier highway?

We were so confident, indeed, that when the old lady at the white house shook her head, and waved us vehemently back to the road, we merely took this to be the conservatism of her years. We were strangers. The authorities had been at pains to build a road for our benefit. It was no less than her duty to advise us to remain upon it. Her apparent denials, even, that the track we were on led to Souillac at all, we merely set down to our mutual ignorance of each other's dialect. And when, a little beyond her house, this track suddenly died, we merely compromised by sliding down into the stony valley upon our right. Up

there on its further brink, we said, the road to Souillac was making its way. In the worst event, we could always ascend and re-establish ourselves; while, if we held onward along the bottom, we should most probably meet it again in a few minutes' time.

With light hearts, therefore, and little knowledge, we followed the winding valley that presently groped through a belt of forest, and was then divided into two by a blunt wedge of rising ground. This we climbed, but only to find that in its turn it became a depression, shallow and pebbly and fringed on all sides by a ragged growth of oak and underbrush. Here we paused, for there were now no signs of any road at all, our earth being bounded by the blunt knolls of these Quercy uplands—desolate mounds sticking up into the sky like blue, unshaven chins. But to go straight forward seemed the wisest plan, and, after traversing another wood, we emerged once more upon a stretch of pebbles, from which it was possible to despatch Justin as a scouting-party to the higher grounds that had now risen on our right.

By this time we had ceased to speculate on the ancient road to Souillac save to be reasonably sure that we ourselves had not been following it.

And, when Justin returned to announce that there were no others in sight, we had to admit that we were uncertain even where Souillac lay. But we were committed to the wilds. It was still possible—a wonderful stimulus—that we were unconsciously being clever. And though, with the sun vertical, and each valley presenting a different angle to us, it was sufficiently difficult to strike a course, we held along, in the absence of any human direction, towards what we believed to be the northern horizon.

All this country, indeed, was agriculturally of so meagre a quality that its apparent desertion by mankind was a matter of no wonder ; and, when at last, upon an opposite hill, we spied a broken-down cabin, it was to find an old couple in it as marooned in poverty as any that we had yet set eyes upon. Blackened and dried, with lustreless eyes and visibly yellow, decaying teeth, there they sat, each shearing a sheep, in the uncleansed yard before their door—mute at first, as are most dwellers in silent places, but presently stammering to us in a *patois* of which we were as ignorant as of Sanskrit. There was a curious lack of tone, too, in their speech that became in retrospect a thing of sadness—as though, in the long process of years, these

stubborn hills had been too much for them, had invaded and possessed their flesh, and driven out their dreams. And yet even so, the animal left in them was not the pale animal of towns. It was neither cunning nor cowed ; and, if we had been less animal ourselves, we should probably have never noticed it there at all. So they chattered and consulted and paddled about on their leathery feet, and, if we learned nothing more from them, we gathered at least that Souillac was somewhere over our shoulders, and that in climbing up to their dwelling-place we had been wandering further from it than ever.

By now, however, it was past noon, and having breakfasted on a bowl of coffee and as much of some sour bread as we had been able to masticate, we were more than ready for the luncheon that we had hoped to find at Souillac. And when, after descending again, and re-climbing, and threading yet another copse of oak, we found ourselves looking into a somewhat larger and less intractable valley, the nearest *auberge* became the subject of our most immediate enquiry. Happily, too, upon the broad opposite slant that soon began to rise up from us to the sky, we saw working in a small vineyard a second elderly couple—the woman weeding and the man spray-

ing each separate vine with copper sulphate against the dreaded phylloxera. Less than an hour and three miles separated these two from the others, but in the scale of being it would have been a little difficult to measure the gulf between them. For though upon these also toil and exposure had written themselves heavily enough, yet from the eyes of both there shone out at us so clean and lively a spirit that they might well have been inhabitants of a wholly different world—as indeed it is quite possible that they were. They directed us, at any rate, to a strip of road climbing the ridge before us, and that would lead us down, they said, in a few minutes to the village of Roc.

We consulted our map, where presently we found it—some four miles west of Souillac.

"Le Roc?"

That was the very place.

And we should find an inn there?

We should find two.

But what they did not prophesy, and what no map could have foretold us was the thrill of beauty with which for a moment it took our breath, when first we saw it—almost dramatically far below us—in what was now the deep garden of the Dordogne.

II

For to tell the truth—it is hard to believe it—we had all forgotten the Dordogne ; not theoretically, since with our brains we had, of course, known that we must be approaching it, but with everything else of us that counted. And now that it lay there at our feet again, at once so sudden and so unruffled, we looked down upon it almost as we had looked down upon it nearly a week ago. For though it was not quite the same river—though it was visibly older and more self-guarded—yet there still shone through it the woodland soul of yesterday. It was still moving with the same youthful gesture ; and, if the girl's feet in it now went hidden and with a maturer dignity, they were still irked a little by her robes of state.

But we had brought her better to-day than mere worship ; and the joy that she gave us, as we scrambled down the steep cliff-front into the village, more than cancelled the devious wanderings behind us. It even gained grace from these, as the salvationist's present appears to gain grace from his past—the brightest excuse, perhaps, for his sorrowful doctrine of original sin. By the same contrast, too, this whole plain that the river had taken for her palace seemed to be carpeted with an extra-

ordinary richness. The very air, as we descended, lay drowsed with luxury, and the village itself, narrow and crumbling as it was, might have been decaying of nothing more than content.

Huddled round the base of the great pillar that had given it its name, and that stood out from the long wall of hills, it seemed to be blinking there in the hot sunshine like some picturesque invalid—as far removed from the hard-bitten health of Payrac and Calès as a Bournemouth arm-chair from a Highland grouse-butt. It had not even troubled, we felt, to wash; and its single *auberge*—we tried in vain to find the other—was of an odour and darkness that reeked to heaven. . . .

And it was upon this afternoon that Sophronia and Justin quarrelled; not vehemently—their civilization prevented this—but with sufficient distinctness for the former to travel the last three miles of our journey in a grim and rather pointed silence—the only protest, we were to understand, possible to her in the obstinate face of brute force.

Nor can it be denied, looking back, that two of those miles were perhaps unnecessary, though they afforded us, as they closely adhered to every

bend and promontory of the cliffs, innumerable views of the town of Souillac upon the other side of the river. They led us also, for a great part of their distance, through a forest of considerable interest, and where we found growing in some profusion what we afterwards learned to be the lizard orchid—common enough here, apparently, but, as we were told by an indignant botanist, almost unknown in England, and why in the name of Linnæus had we not sent him some? Unfortunately, however, someone had mentioned—and Sophronia had overheard him—the existence of a *bac* or ferry about a mile upstream from Roc, the which, if we had found it, would obviously have saved us this detour. For there was no bridge until we had passed Souillac by about a mile, where we joined once more, some six hours later, the same road that we had deserted at ten o'clock.

On the other hand, as Justin pointed out, the ferry or *bac* might have been a myth; we might never have discovered it; the river was nearly a mile from the road; and never surely had his axiom about short cuts been more trenchantly upheld than to-day. Moreover it appeared later in the evening (to be precise, at dinner, where for the first time since leaving Tulle we were

waited upon by a boiled shirt) that a certain amount of Sophronia's reticence had been due to the fact that she was feeling sick—the probable result of an admixture of the Spanish sardines and sweet biscuits that, being the only things in tins, we had bought for our lunch at Roc.

It was a deflection, in any case, from health that made a peculiar appeal to Justin; and we were all happier and more united when an excellent meal had readjusted it.

CHAPTER VIII

SOUILLAC TO BEYNAC

I

All this night, from some bush or house-top quite close at hand, a nightingale sang to us; and as we left Souillac next morning full of bread and jam and sunshine, we suggested to Justin—as a minor or minimus poet or poeticule; as a creature, at any rate, who had been paid as much as ten-and-sixpence for his rhymes—that he should assist us in commemorating this serenade in verse. For not only had it been the most vivid and beautiful feature of Souillac—a commercial centre, *très bien située*, and containing many prosperous merchants—but it would pleasantly occupy us until we had finally passed the last of the said merchants' houses. It would prevent us, in any case—and on a Sunday, too, and a day of the utmost geniality—from being superior at the expense of an architecture with which we chanced to disagree, and that quite probably was full of merits to which we were superciliously blind. And if, as Justin pointed

out—rather more pontifically, we thought, than his reputation warranted—the nightingale had at least twice been classically enshrined, he must remember that it was not our particular one who had been hymned on either occasion.

If it had been a blackbird it might have been different—

> O blackbird, what a boy you are,
> How you do go it . . .

If it had been a blackbird we might have stifled our afflatus. But the supreme thing about a nightingale had never been said in nine lines. The very fact that Justin could adduce two authorities went to prove this. And, while every blackbird that ever lived might have perched in the garden of T. E. Brown, there wouldn't have been much room, we felt, for this friend of ours, in either of the others that Justin had mentioned.

We were not sure even—it was rather a radical morning—if any real nightingale had ever sung in them at all; and the little winged ghosts that had done duty for them in those pensive glades, well, they might have been Syrian or Greek, but they had certainly not been French. '*Ah rossignol tu as le cœur gai*'—so ran the old *chanson;* and they were surely no ancestors to the merry

and slightly self-conscious artist who had so lavished himself for our benefit last night. For, if he had been whistling to the stars, he had always kept an eye upon the gallery. He was no crude boy, he would have had us know, at his first love-ditty. He could touch all the notes. He could evoke mysteries. He could abolish time and space. But passion—pain ? Oh, well, certainly, in their right place—how was that now, and that ? But *eternal* passion, *eternal* pain—why, tut tut, *messieurs et dame*, he was not that sort of bird.

So (we began) the nightingale of Souillac,
He sang to us all night
Of wreath and rout and Bacchic shout
And the wine of man's delight ;
Of faces flushed with laughter,
Of maids divinely white,
Or (*piano*, *piano*, gentlemen) the gurgle of a water-brook
Somewhere just out of sight,
Drop, drop, drop, drop—
With goblin bugles winding,
And gay boys beating drums,
The while, since this was *last* night,
Some far-off motor hums
Down monstrous mountain passes
To grots of witchy black,
Where the hawks cry, and the bats fly,
And the torrent boulders crack,
And the skies fall,
And the stars fall,
Drip, drip, drip . . .

We were now, perhaps, a mile out of Souillac, travelling westward with sun and stream ; and

it was at this point that we overtook upon the road a cheerful and copper-coloured father taking two of his children for a Sunday jaunt. They were all mounted in what were probably the simplest terms to which a vehicle could be reduced—a bright blue, oblong box, carefully balanced on two wheels, and attached by shafts to what appeared to be a singularly *blasé* mule. His pace, at any rate, unspurred by verse-making and the general splendour of the day, fell considerably short of our own. And after exchanging greetings, we had soon left them behind us.

But while we were thus following the river, with the cliffs and railway upon our right, our original intention, after leaving Souillac, had been to explore northward up the Borrèze, visiting the castle of Fénelon, and spending the night at Salignac. Sophronia, however, having found her Dordogne again, had summarily refused to be parted from it; and hearing of an hotel—that is an understatement unless there are hotels in Arden—at Beynac, a little village twenty miles or so down-stream, we had changed our minds, and started off to discover it.

But it had been a good change. It had been the right change, as we were all aware as soon as we had made it. And the Dordogne had never yet

shone for us as she was shining at this moment. Moreover, at Peyrillac, where we meant to eat our lunch, we should find a train at one o'clock—and a train of which we should not hesitate to take the fullest advantage. For a whole week we had been tramping upon our feet. For to-day at least we would travel in state. Beynac—we liked the name of it. It came with a presage of serenity. Beynac—and then, in the next moment, before we quite realized what had happened, we had crossed the boundary and were standing in Périgord.

II

It was an auspicious entry. The wind sang. The mountains flew flags, if not for us. And above all, it was a real Sun-day, sun in the air, sun on the road, sun on each leaf of the flickering poplars—and there is no tree that can laugh with quite such glee as a poplar—and a million burning, melting, blinding sunlets, flashing and fading on the bosom of the river. The first man who met us, too, was as jolly as a baker—his *bon* as hearty as an oven and his *jour* as round as a loaf; while just at hand, upon a farm-house step, somebody unseen was playing a concertina.

And yet, looking back, we can see now that all

this could not have been otherwise. For this was Périgord, as God made it, and no accident of weather could have obscured it. And if there were still soul-depths to be revealed to us—magical wells of moon and dream—this was its proper morning face, and the only one that we should have remembered. So we held on down the valley between the ripening crops and the busy hay-fields—curiously busy, to our English eyes, for a Sunday morning, and with the strange exhibition of modern and medieval methods that seemed to characterize all the surrounding industry—a yoke of oxen being harnessed to an American Deering mower, and the swathes turned by wooden hay-forks that might have been old in Mesopotamia. Nor could the haymakers, ignorant souls, with whom we presently talked at Peyrillac, understand the piety that might sit at ease and fill its belly in the front parlour, but must not secure the good Lord's gifts because of the name a day happened to be called by—and when to-morrow, look you, might be wet and the task impossible. But they were kindly men all, if unenlightened, and their voices in the field behind us blended less incongruously than might have been supposed with what Sophronia read to us after lunch—perhaps because these also had been the words of

a Sabbath-breaker; or because they had been spoken—there were mountains here too—in a sort of everyday sunshine like this.

We had now reduced, since we proposed to use the railway, the rest of our walking to something less than a mile; and, but for Justin, we might have dozed here for at least half an hour longer. It is another of Justin's drawbacks, however, that in the presence of an impending train he always suffers from, and seldom troubles to conceal, a certain mental agitation; and, although we were separated from the pretty cottage that was the station by no more than a couple of hay-fields, we found it expedient to allow ourselves about forty minutes for the journey. This would ensure, at any rate, peace of mind for Justin, and probably some entertainment for a little group of pink-cheeked young ladies whom we discovered to be taking the air under the station pergola. These were in the abashed stage of development that has only just put its hair up, but, although unable to speak any English, they were quite willing to be talked to. They showed us among other things the ticket-office, that proved to be synonymous with the kitchen; and it gave us a new and rather hospitable conception of travelling to be handed our tickets through its open window.

As at Bretenoux, a single line appeared to suffice for all the traffic that plied between here and Bordeaux; and, as we sat upon our knapsacks, waiting for the arrival of the train, we had ample opportunities to study it from almost every point of view. Thus it detracted hardly at all from the rustic peace of the village, prettily placed in a dell with the wood-crowned hills above it, and presided over by a modern church with a graceful spire. Even the line itself, as seemed, however, to be the usual case, was half buried in vegetation, many of the sleepers lying concealed under a rich growth of pink convolvulus, while in one spot, within three inches of the actual rail, and growing to a height of at least six inches above it, we observed a particularly fine specimen of the purple bugloss.

But perhaps the most memorable event of our vigil at Peyrillac was the finding by Justin upon what passed for the platform of a silver fifty-centime piece of money—the only treasure of the kind that he had discovered since, at the age of nine, he had picked up a watch in High Street, Kensington. Then, as we still gloated upon this, the church bell began to sound, and little parties of white-frocked children to issue forth from their houses, brushed and shining and with books of

devotion in their hands; and soon after this, under a plume of smoke, we could see the twinkle of brasswork far up the line.

Cazoulès, Peyrillac, Carlux, Sarlat, not many railway trains can run habitually to such a melody of syllables, as few lines, indeed, can have been set among lovelier or more changeful vistas. So we clanked along with a cheerful company of brown-faced men and women, leaving the river to reach Sarlat—a busy and ancient little town and one that contained, as we hoped, both our kit-bag and tidings of the babies—but rejoining it some six miles later at Vezac, where we again took to our feet.

All these six miles we had descended sharply between steep, wooded hills, but at Vezac the line ran free again before crossing a bend of the river; and, as we left the station, it was beyond an interlude of fields that we now saw rising the *château*-crowned cliff of Beynac. In earlier days, indeed, this must have been a sort of round table of *châteaux*, for as we approached that of Beynac, dominating the west, we saw another facing it, embedded in trees upon the opposite side of the Dordogne, and yet a third upon our left, also separated from us by the river—the jagged ruin of Castelnaud upon a hill-top. Behind this, again,

though we could not see it, was the old walled town of Domme; and behind them all must have lain a hinterland so sparse and savage that this garden between may well have been the theatre of their envy. Even to-day, stretched in peace, and with the dead *châteaux* nodding across it, something of those tears and braveries still hung faintly in its air. Its peace was not less rich for that. But beneath its crops and music lay the ashes and echoes of all that had purchased it; and there were hours at Beynac when we should not have been surprised to see a spear-point pricking among the trees.

The river itself had made a great bend here; so that when we stepped out of the train we must have been almost three-quarters of a mile from its banks, but as we approached the village, we also drew near to the river, from which our hotel, we found, was only separated by the breadth of the road and a strip of grass. We saw at once, too, that the good words about this little inn at Beynac—and it was scarcely more, though it was scrupulously clean and the greater part of it modern—had been well and truly spoken. The daintiest of *bonnes* led us up the staircase that climbed from the road to the little terrace, her pretty arms bare to the elbow, and as pink and

brown as they were sturdy, and her trim feet clad in the soft slippers that were Beynac's footwear. And the motherliest of hostesses roused herself from sleep to show us our bedrooms, and brew us some coffee, before we climbed the cobbled streets to the *château.*

They could both, as we afterwards discovered, take the most admirable care of themselves—the pretty *bonne*, in the face of any unwelcome attentions, and her mistress in all that belonged to the proper management of her affairs. And, indeed, everything about Beynac exhaled the same incurious atmosphere of hospitality and complete independence. Its old ladies, brownest and jolliest of their kind, would bow to you with friendliness. But they would not look after you up the street. You had chosen to come here; and you were quite welcome. You thought the view from the *château* very beautiful? Well, that was kind of you. But it spoke for itself; and they did not go into raptures with strangers. To-morrow morning, perhaps, when they knew you better—to-morrow it would be different. But in the meantime Beynac, look you, though hardly in the world, was by no means quite out of it. People drove here sometimes in brakes, and, in these later days, *en automobile.* The very fact

that *Madame* and her son had recently enlarged their hotel, and built a new concrete terrace with nasturtiums climbing over its railings—this very fact went to show that Beynac was by no means undiscovered. And although, as at Rocamadour, we were the only guests staying for the night, when we dined upon the terrace, it was with a party of motorists making very merry at one table, and three or four quieter pedestrians at a third.

Then, with dinner over, we crossed the road, leaving the revellers to their cups, and, sauntering up the stream, were beyond all but their loudest jests. The sun had set now, but only just, and all that was of earth lay pooled in colour—the eastward mountains in a delicate, fainting turquoise, and the westward, as we turned about, in every blend of purple. These were at once thrown nearer to us by the coral and gold of the sunset, but held back by the tall columns of the poplars, still as sentinels, and of an almost smoky blackness above the umber and tinged pallor of the stream. For not more, perhaps, than five minutes we stood surrounded by this glory; and then quite suddenly it ebbed away from us, and night had fallen.

III

Upon this night also, into the moon-drenched stillness beyond the river a nightingale poured its soul out ; and it might have been the soul of Beynac. For us, at any rate, as we listened, it was the consummation of Beynac's spell. Henceforward we were its slaves; and though we actually stayed there only three nights, yet they touched with their witchery all our other nights in Périgord.

So strong was it, indeed, that for the first time since we had left England the word 'necessary' crept suddenly into our vocabulary. And it became necessary, the next morning, to walk into Sarlat for our letters.

Once again it was a day of heat, with the Beynac haymakers long afield, the road climbing upwards through the same valleys that we had passed yesterday in the train, and upon the plain, until we had reached these, blindingly white and unshaded.

Here we passed the little school-house, wherein a heavily moustached, plump profile was patiently visible over a nodding row of scholars ; and, apart from these, until we were actually approaching Sarlat we saw less, perhaps, than a dozen human beings—four barefooted girls and men hoeing a

patch of potatoes; two women in enormous sabots struggling with a refractory donkey; and a shy girl in a cottage garden with a small boy tugging at her skirts. Here, for the first time, in these sun-filled clearings, we saw strips of maize about two feet high, and later, where the forest broke away towards Sarlat, two or three men quarrying clay for the famous local pottery.

Once in Sarlat, however, and Beynac had mastered us again more strongly than ever; so that we beheld this town with strange eyes and a judgment consciously warped. Not yet having entered Coutras from the north, we believed its main street to be the longest and most merciless in France; and its only benediction in our eyes was the cool post-office that contained our letters. Here the pleasantest of ladies, wholly unconscious of what she was doing, handed us tidings of the glorious birth of Persephone's fourth tooth, with mother and child doing as well, we were assured, as the circumstances allowed; and here we learned also that, in our more backward island, the paddock grass had not yet been cut for Pandora's benefit.

Then, from a sense of duty, we peeped for a moment into a dark, high-roofed church, and ate eggs and cheese in a street-side café near two

gentlemen playing backgammon—after which, having visited the station, and re-addressed our kit-bag, we threw ourselves into the same train that had yesterday first carried us to Beynac. Like needles, deflected with pain, we had flashed back again to our pole; and, half an hour later, from the kindest and most ubiquitous of ferrymen we had borrowed a stout, wooden craft, and were poling and paddling it upstream. He had required no money for the loan of this. "*Comme vous voulez*"—but the Dordogne was powerful, and he had regarded us with a little doubt. Would it not be better if he came with us?

"*Vous savez conduire?*"

"*Oh, mais oui!*"

We nodded our heads, for had not Sophronia practically been born in the Thames, and Justin educated for six years at a rowing school? So we poled and paddled across the stream, and, finding a sunny spot of bleached pebbles, were soon wallowing in what was Lethe for all but the ardour of being alive. We write 'wallowed' since in any channel, where swimming became necessary, only by the most vigorous of exercise was it even possible to keep level; and after that we re-crossed the stream, and chained our boat to a willow-bush.

For two hours or more we must have lain there, staring through the leaves into the sky, with the little fish leaping, and upon the air the cries of the *faneurs* to their oxen, and, from time to time, beyond the bushes above our heads, the creak, creak of an ox-cart making its slow way home. Incredibly leisurely are the movements of such, and only by working for very long hours can the hay, one thinks, ever be transported at all. Thus, from our little terrace before dinner, we watched a pair of them drawing near ; and it was as though two elderly haycocks, infinitely *blasé*, had resolved, without much hope, to woo the village for diversion.

Our dinner this night was a very quiet one. There was thunder about and no colour ; and the haymakers were working to the last limits of daylight. This was why, perhaps, certain preparations, not very eagerly carried out, had been left apparently to the children of the village. Some of these, however, we now saw carrying faggots of wood to the river bank, where they built a little pyramid, to which presently they set fire. This, as some fellow-diners explained to us, was the *feu de S. Jean*, just as on the 29th there would be *feux de S. Pierre*. It was not treated, we perceived, very seriously, but the little wand

of flame below us lent a curious enchantment to the night. It threw the mountains that, up to the present, had seemed rather closer than usual into a suddenly distant and more shadowy background, while the crescent of water that it had cut off from the main flow of the stream shone like sapphire beneath its fringe of bushes.

Justin, who was rather moved by the incident, began to question the villagers closely, trying to trace a connection between this strange ceremony and the in-gathering of the hay. But they assured him that there was none, although at the time of the hay-feast little crosses of grass—the crosses of S. John—would be nailed up beside the cottage doors.

It was almost dark now, and half an hour later, on the southern horizon, another and larger fire peeped over the trees, and soon afterwards a third and fourth among the hills towards Domme. Then the dark-eyed girl, who had brought the geese home, re-appeared driving in the ducks; and presently behind her came the oxen with the weary, barefooted haymakers. The face of each, as he crossed the firelight, was touched with an unearthly crimson; with the stout ferryman in the background beaching his phantom boat.

CHAPTER IX

SOIR DE S. JEAN

We all dreamed that night, but only Justin, who is not a cricketer, remembered his dream, trying to explain it to us, the next evening, upon Freud's hypothesis.

Thus, for hour after hour, it appeared, he had been engaged in a cricket-match upon a large, double bed, himself bowling, and the famous old Nottinghamshire professional, Attewell, stubbornly defending the bolster end. Then with a fast ball he had succeeded at last in dinting the wicket, but only to find to his chagrin that the umpire had been drinking whisky under the bed, and that his opponent, therefore, remained not out.

Faint but pursuing, and with the delinquent dragged into light by Mr. Warner, who was fielding upon the carpet at mid-on, he had taken up the ball again and a second time viciously hit the bolster, but only to discover a second time

that the umpire had vanished under the bed, leaving Mr. Warner helpless and Attewell still triumphant.

We had just finished an excellent dinner, and were sitting alone upon the terrace; and Justin lifted a match to the bowl of his pipe.

"I have invented nothing," he said, "and I can still see it in every detail—the round impression on the bolster; the tentative expression on Attewell's face (only the expression, for I have never actually seen him); the polite distress of Mr. Warner, and the hang-dog appearance of the umpire."

It was the evening of midsummer-day, and already the life of the village had become familiar to us. We had scarcely strayed from it since breakfast-time; and we wondered what the goose-girl was doing. For, though the ducks and the geese were safely herded for the night, she was disappearing yet a third time into the upstream dusk.

"But what exactly," enquired Sophronia, "is Professor Freud's hypothesis?"

Justin exhaled some tobacco-smoke.

"Well, it's rather complicated," he observed, "and I hardly understand it myself. But put briefly it amounts to this, I think—that night-

dreams are really the same as day-dreams modified by the desire to remain asleep."

He frowned a little.

"Of course, that's probably too brief," he said, "to be a true statement of the theory. But they're odd things, dreams. Now why should I have dreamed about Attewell seeing that I went to bed full of the fires of S. John ?"

But we shook our heads, and he went on.

"Did I ever tell you about Miss Plintock ?"

The ferryman's little girl, who generally ran barefoot, sauntered past in her new Paris boots.

"No," we said. "Who was Miss Plintock ?"

He filled up his wineglass, and crossed his legs.

"It's rather a sad story," he said, "and a very old one, though hardly, perhaps, among the oldest. It presupposes, that is to say, a sort of urban Christianity."

The pretty *bonne* brought us our coffee and the big bottle of Kirsch. It was almost dark now; and we ourselves might have been sitting in dream-land—might have turned aside, for a moment, from the slow procession of time through space. Justin smoked for a minute in silence.

"Well, Miss Plintock," he said, "was a Sunday-school teacher, but not what you might call a regular one. She would take a class, that is to say,

when one of the other teachers was away. And though she would have liked to have one of her own—she was extraordinarily fond of children—her invalid mother, you see, couldn't regularly spare her. She couldn't spare her, in fact, for anything regularly. And the consequence was that Miss Plintock never regularly did anything. She was what they called in her parish a useful stop-gap—not the sort of person, you understand, who got periodical testimonials, but a handy, second-best creature who could generally be relied upon in an emergency; a kind of permanent stepney-wheel on the back of the parochial car."

He blew a smoke-ring into the air.

"At home," he went on, "it was more or less the same. Her father had been a tailor at Hackney; and when he had needed a secretary she had become that secretary. When he died, and her mother had needed a companion, well, Miss Plintock had very naturally become that companion. That was about seventeen years before the incident I'm telling you; and upon Mr. Plintock's death they had all moved into the small house in Clapton—the widow and Miss Plintock and the younger daughter Ruth. Ruth herself doesn't exactly come into the story,

except that her career had hitherto provided an outlet for the romance of both. Thus, at twenty-two she had been marvellously accepted for missionary work in the Indian Zenanas, and her weekly letters had become the dazzling events of Miss Plintock's experience. For Ruth was an excellent correspondent, and all the magic and mystery of the East, the sense of innumerable, secret existences contemporary with her own, their curious glamour and strange joys and sins—all these things had distilled from her closely written pages. And Miss Plintock had collected pennies for the Zenana missionaries' upkeep. Then, after seven years, Ruth had returned, very brown and rather thin, but full of queer stories and fiery devotion. She had stayed in Clapton, a strange and almost holy figure from afar. She had made so distinct an impression, indeed, upon the parochial circle that Miss Plintock had basked ever since in its reflected glory. And finally, more wonderful still, she had been wooed and won by a Church of England clergyman, and was already the mother of four miracles of promise. These Miss Plintock had never seen, except with the eye of faith, but she hoped that, in a year or two, a living at home would be found for Ruth's husband. For neither

he nor Ruth, who was now thirty-six, were quite so strong as they once had been; as was hardly to be expected, of course, after such crowded lives. And there were times when Miss Plintock would see visions of an English lane with four children in it, actual nephews and nieces, and herself running wild with them—that is, if her mother could spare her.

"Those were the times, too, when she would perhaps tip-toe half shamefacedly to the looking-glass, searching for traces of her thirty-nine years, and re-considering the question of having the mole removed from her right cheek. Some years before she had been told that this would be quite easy; and at that time, although her features had been plain, her complexion, she thought, hadn't been wholly unattractive. Something deep down in her conscience, however, had always prevented her from having the thing out, though she knew that the children sometimes called her 'warty.' She had an idea, you see, that it had perhaps been sent her to prevent her from becoming conceited, as a sort of rebuke to an unspeakably evil tendency that she knew to be part of her nature—in the same class, in fact, though a very long way down, with the thorn in the flesh possessed by S. Paul.

"But now that the children—her own flesh and blood almost—might soon be returning to England; now that her complexion, you see, had been reduced to this rather pasty monochrome, would she be justified in forgoing the handicap? Was that old horrible temptation sufficiently in chains? She didn't know. She was afraid perhaps not. And meantime there was her life here—well?"

Justin bent forward, and sipped his coffee.

"Well, as a matter of fact," he went on, "it was only the cook-general knocking at the bedroom door. Miss Helliott, it seemed, was down in the hall waiting to see her about the Sunday-school treat."

He leaned back again, smoking in silence. The seventy-year-old washerwomen, who had been given their supper in a little room downstairs, went up the road, wiping their mouths, and chuckling contentedly over some joke. A lifetime ago they had been held fast, and suckled babies, and now they washed clothes. They had been standing up to their knees in the Dordogne since eight o'clock in the morning. After a minute or two, Justin continued.

"Nor does Miss Helliott," he said, "or Miss Elliott, as the minority usually called her,

really come very much into the story; and to Miss Plintock's eye, at any rate, she was almost everything that Miss Plintock wasn't. She was good-looking, for instance. She was plump. She was prompt. She was efficient. She was a success, in fact, in every work that she took up. Thus, she had founded what was in everybody's opinion quite the best private girls' school in Clapton; of which she remained the extremely popular head-mistress. That would have been enough, Miss Plintock used to think, for any one person to be. But in addition she was not only the head of the Sunday-school and the local secretary of the Girls' Friendly Society, but she was a member of the Board of Guardians. No one, not even the most ill-bred of the local children, could ever imaginably have called her 'warty' or, indeed, by any nickname at all. And, confronted with her clear grey eyes and rosy cheeks, Miss Plintock was quite convinced that her own unmentionable temptation could never for a moment have assailed Miss Elliott. She was as pure as a cold bath; whereas there were moments, alas when Miss Plintock——

She asked Miss Elliott to come into the drawing-room. But Miss Elliott shook her head.

"'No,' she said, 'not for a second. I've about

a hundred things to do before lunch; only I've just heard that Miss Hunter has backed down from the Sunday-school treat, and we were absolutely relying on her to look after the infants. So I've just popped in to see if you could take her place?' Miss Plintock's eyes lit up. She especially worshipped the infants. Moreover, they were to be taken this year to Culver Bois—one of the prettiest corners of Epping Forest—and a seat in the brakes, which were always crowded, was a rare privilege in this particular parish.

"'Oh, I should just love to,' she cried. 'Will you wait while I ask my mother?'

"Miss Elliott nodded and smiled a little grimly. She hadn't much sympathy with *malades imaginaires* and even less with those who consented to be imposed upon by them. Miss Plintock came back in about five minutes, a little flushed and with the mole conspicuous.

"'Yes, if all's well,' she said, 'Mother thinks she could spare me.'

"Miss Elliott shook hands with her, and departed briskly.

"'Then that's all right,' she said, 'to-morrow morning at nine o'clock sharp.'

"But at nine o'clock, alas, it appeared that

Miss Hunter could go after all; and that Miss Plintock wouldn't therefore be wanted. They were very sorry to have troubled her; and if there had been a spare seat in the brakes she might, perhaps, have been able to come too. But the vicar, who had a brother-in-law in the Army Service Corps, always adjusted the accommodation to the precise numbers expected; and every seat was already more than occupied. No doubt, however, she wouldn't be grieved to avoid so fatiguing a journey, and under a sky that threatened to be so cloudless; and, indeed, looking back, Miss Plintock was never quite sure that she shouldn't have accepted this line of retreat provided for her.

"But her selfishness—another of her faults—now stepped in to betray her; and Mr. Browne, the junior curate, becoming unexpectedly autocratic, insisted upon squeezing her into the last vehicle. If she could accommodate two small girls in her lap, he said, why, there was any amount of room for her. And what a ride that was, in the sweet air, and across the Lea valley and through Walthamstow. Even looking back, with full knowledge, it was hard to regret that she had been a part of it—the jolly chorus of the children, the soft profile of the trees, and the

blowing by of the wind full of scent. Who would have thought that behind that loveliness the devil lay so subtly entrenched—or that, beguiled by it, she could have yielded to him so woefully ? "

Justin paused for a moment, and relit his pipe.

" Afterwards, of course, it was all so clear," he said. " If she hadn't looked wistful when Miss Hunter appeared they would never have made room for her. And if this hadn't been exactly selfish it had at any rate, she felt, been obtrusive. For nobody had really wanted old ' warty ' after Miss Hunter's arrival ; and though everybody had been the soul of kindness she stood necessarily a little apart from the prearranged programme.

" Thus, from the very outset, as she came to realize, she had fallen a little from the highest rule of conduct ; and, once having done so, she had drifted inevitably into ever more perilous paths. She had found herself free, for example, if she cared to do so, to wander by herself in the forest, breathing its beauty, and lured by its vistas for the first time, almost, in a dozen years. And though she had remained close to her party throughout the whole of the forenoon, helping where she could, and joining in the games, the temptation to be alone for a little had afterwards

become too strong for her. She had bought herself a bath-bun, and slipped away unperceived from the dinner-tent. The forest had opened to her, and received her; and, wilfully deaf to her conscience, she had even felt wickedly pleased at this. She had felt like a truant from school on a day of wild divinity. She had felt like a welcomed guest in lovely, unlawful places. She had run from glade to glade, her heart beating, her cheeks flushed; and every glade, a pool of summer, had seemed friendlier to her than the last. Finally, wonder of wonders, she had surprised a reed-fringed lake. Tired out, and under the shade of an over-arching elm, she sat down by it, and began to munch her bun. She wished that she had brought two, and then remembered that she hadn't said grace. But when she stared up for a moment at the sky she could only see the dome of branches, and then before her the watching reeds and the still waters of the lake.

"She rose to her knees, and bent over them, and found them crystal above sand. The liquid forms of fishes slanted lazily below her. But for their dark shapes, indeed, and herself, the whole world might have been slumbering; and even the fishes, in their leisurely movements,

seemed only half awake. She held her breath for a moment listening. A leaf dropped down upon the water. 'I wonder if I dare,' she thought. A dragon-fly touched her, winking glory.

"Then, with rapid, decisive movements, she slipped off her shoes and stockings, and her whole being thrilled to the sand's kiss and the soft creeping-up of the water. She took off her hat and threw it ashore, holding up her skirts as the years fell away from her. In that pregnant, breathing solitude she might have been centuries from Clapton.

"'I wonder if I dare,' she thought again, and crouched once more in the reeds.

"'I wonder if I dare,' but even as she wondered her fingers out-ran her brain, fled to and fro across her garments. Fair and white, for the sole time in her thirty-nine years of life, she slid down between the rushes and into the open air and water. She waded deep, holding her arms out. She felt her whole body exult and glow. For a whole minute or two at least she was something more than just Miss Plintock. She was a flagon of wine. She was a harp. She was a bow and arrow. She was a woman. And then, with a chuckle that froze her marrow, somebody behind her laughed aloud."

Justin pushed back his chair a little, and watched the tobacco-smoke wreathing upward from his pipe. With glowing cheeks from out of the darkness came the goose-girl and her lover.

"It froze her marrow," he said, "and yet—and yet—Miss Plintock could never acquit herself of that—it didn't freeze it quite so much as it ought to have done. She was even glad—yes, she had to admit it—she was even positively *glad* that somebody else had at last discovered her beauty. For the unseen Miss Plintock was really beautiful—and there her secret iniquity leapt into light—that there were actually moments, for all her prayers, when she yearned that somebody might know this. . . .

"And now somebody did know, a bearded person with the youngest eyes she had ever seen. She could hardly take her own from them. They were so uneducated and yet so profoundly wise. They were at once a boy's eyes, and an adorer's, and a connoisseur's. They were a god's. She waded out to him, and he took her hands. He never even glanced at her mole. Why should he, indeed, with so much else to admire ?

"So they sat down there in the shade, and for the first time somebody made love to her—a sort of passionless, brotherly love, and yet all the time,

somehow, more intimate than this. It was as though they had just opened together some long-shut drawer. All her jewels that nobody had seen—all these he was touching now, and reverencing. They were the pearls (the least of all, perhaps) but still a part of that great price hidden in darkness by all the unwanted, good women—that deep reserve, so scrupulously and, as she believed, justly guarded for the security of the world's spiritual credit.

"She looked up at him with an odd, elderly innocence.

"'And yet, do you know,' she said, 'I would have given them all for a baby.'

"Then a little breeze lifted the paper-bag, and blew it against her cheek. She woke with a start, and saw two of the infants regarding her gravely.

"'Why, she's crying,' they said, though this wasn't exactly true. She was merely blushing—but how could they tell this?—for what she had dreamed; and because in dreams, as she had always been told, our secret sins swagger abroad, and reveal to us the true depths of our depravity."

Justin bent forward again, and knocked the ashes out of his pipe. The moon was late to-

night, as though at a feast, and the valley so still that we could hear its heart-beat—old and wise and trustful of earth, and accepting no heaven that was ashamed of it.

"And does that illustrate," we enquired, "Professor Freud's hypothesis?"

But Justin shook his head.

"I don't know," he said, and then, as we were silent, filled our glasses.

"Then why did you tell it us?" enquired Sophronia.

"Because you wanted to pity those washer-women."

CHAPTER X

BEYNAC TO BELVÈS

I

THAT was our last night at Beynac, and the next morning we woke to a *brouillard*, or fine mist of rain, that hid away from us all but the immediate greenery. We had resolved to make to-day, in accordance with our altered plans, for Belvès, a little town among the hills to the south-west, and of which we knew nothing but that it was distant from us about twelve or thirteen miles. And although to our uneducated eyes the sky looked singularly unpromising, both *Madame* and her son said that it would soon be clear.

For the last time, therefore, at about eleven, we were ferried away from Beynac, waving our hands to *Madame* and the *bonne*, and shaking a sad farewell with the son of the house upon the opposite shore. Nor for the present were there any signs of a mitigated weather. As we turned towards Fayrac the rain slanted against us with a gentle but steady persistence; and, though we

were sheltered for a little by the baron's plantations, as soon as we turned westward and left these, it was to meet it again once more. For about half an hour we followed this road, winding along the base of the hills, at some distance now from the river, and with the railway lying between; and then, turning south along one of the numerous glens, once more we left the Dordogne behind us.

Though not so sterile as the Quercy valleys that had last confounded us south of the river, this appeared to be sufficiently unyielding; and to-day, at any rate, with the rain filing across it, it was perhaps as dreary as any that we had traversed. The general contour, too, of the country, as we now began to ascend the valley's side, appeared to be very much the same—broad, flat-topped ridges, more or less parallel to one another, set at right angles to the Dordogne, and with these deep trenches between them. And if scarcity of population had been a common feature of all the others this was apparently no exception to their rule.

Thus in four miles we saw but one woman and a distant blue-smocked postman, though it was not a day, indeed, to tempt pedestrians, and one that forbade work among the hay; while much

of the gloom, no doubt, with which this particular district seemed to be clothed, was merely atmospheric and the reflection of a certain melancholy in ourselves.

For, apart from the contrast of these shrouds with the lustre and warmth of the last three days, our parting from Beynac had been something more than the mere *bon voyage* of pleasant acquaintanceship; and to-day was none the less frigid because yesterday had taken us to its heart. There was even, to our jaundiced outlook, an actual malevolence in its attitude, as though it were wilfully seeking to hide from us the beauties that we knew it must possess, and that would probably be revealed without question to the pilgrims of to-morrow. Had they been unbandaged, for instance, the views behind us could never have been less than lovely; and, when presently we stood upon the ridge between this and the neighbouring ravine, there must have been veiled from us as spacious a prospect as we had seen.

Even as it was, the clouds that draped it could not wholly conceal its grandeur, chilled, no doubt, and made alien by their intervening presence—and there was a moment, before we began to descend again, when we might have

been staring across the river into Glencoe upon a November twilight.

All the way, in fact, until Belvès itself stared down upon us out of Aquitaine, we were being subtly put in mind of Scotland—in the peculiar, ironical waxing and waning of the rain, and the combined smell of damp herbage and mackintosh as, from time to time, we crouched up somewhere for shelter. Nor did we meet, all the way, more than two cheerful persons—a merry woman in wet sabots who waved her hand to us as we lunched, and a second sturdy little postman, trudging his daily thirty kilometres, who soon deserted us, however, for the speedier vehicle of a friend.

This was about three miles from Belvès; and, half an hour later, having climbed and descended yet another rib of hill, we found ourselves in a sort of delta, containing among other things a line of railway, and broadening southwards to a considerable stretch of level, cultivated country. Here the rain lessened for a time, scattering in gusts from higher and more hurrying clouds; and against these, a little later, we beheld Belvès, standing compact on a dark escarpment of cliff—a kind of peninsula thrust out from the loftier forest-land to the west, and commanding the plain for several miles on each side.

It was a small town, older in outline, as it stood thus against the sky, than any that we had hitherto seen; and, apart from this, it began to affect us almost at once in a way that was less easy to define. We seemed to be aware in it, even already, of some disagreeable element—as though its sunlessness were a little more or a little less than physical; and as though, at each step of its long, flanking approach, we were somehow being spied upon from those secret walls. It was an odd sensation. It was so obviously negligible that we merely talked instead of the little detached station at its foot, and the possibility, if we should not care for our hotel, of taking an evening train to le Buisson.

But while it was thus largely to be accounted for in the peculiar circumstances of our arrival—between discharged and quickly gathering clouds—yet, as soon as we entered this town, we seemed to be moving in a strangely less innocent environment. Its history and reticences, we felt, were of another and curiously different order; while the pale faces that stared at us out of its devious, insanitary streets were not as the faces that had regarded us either in Argentat or Beaulieu.

In no town, indeed, that we had yet entered had we been so persistently stared at, or with less evidence behind the eyes of any friendly sentiment; and even the children, standing about in little listless groups, seemed to be informed with the same clan-like quality—at once sly and supercilious and the possessors of whispered knowledge. So confusing, too, were the angles at which these streets crossed one another or united, that, more than once, as we wandered about, hoping to come by chance upon our hotel, we found ourselves returned to some position that we had hardly seemed to have left, and facing watchers again upon whom we had turned our backs, we hoped, for the last time.

We had now resolved (although we should scarcely have liked to say why) to avoid spending the night here, so fast falling, if this were possible; and the first view of our hotel strongly endorsed this intention. Standing back a little from the street, like some large private house, it was barred from the pavement by a tall façade of railings, behind and through which straggled a growth of wet, untidy laurels; and it had not any tenderness, even of decay. On the contrary, it was neither old nor particularly new nor frankly shabby, and seemed at once to stand apart from,

and yet to share the counsels of, the town—and to be merely tolerant of strangers upon some code that had been pre-arranged. It only touched the street, at any rate, in the shape of an ill-lit café; and here, after ringing a bell, and a slight pause, we were served with some coffee and a railway time-table.

By now, however, although the hour was still some way from that of sunset, a further relay of heavy clouds had brought twilight with them, breaking once more into a thin rain outside. Moreover, there was no train, we found, leaving Belvès till a late hour at night; and, having once freed ourselves from our knapsacks, we were singularly loth to buckle them on again. The girl who had brought us our coffee, too, and whom we rightly guessed to be the daughter of the house, had attracted us all by a certain refinement of expression; and, though her eyes had been guarded, there could surely be no harm, we thought, in asking her to let us see the bedrooms.

These were reached by leaving the café, and crossing a small courtyard, lying between the laurels that we had first seen and the peeling face of the house; and, though we only arrived at them after a rather gloomy and tortuous procession down two or three passages, we

decided to take them for the night—and, at the same moment, the clouds gave way to a watery interlude of sunshine.

It was because of this, perhaps, and because by now the glances that followed us were more familiar, that on going out again before dinner we were less sensible of their influence; and when, on our way to visit the church, we had left the more crowded part of the town, we might almost have escaped from it altogether. For here, in any case, our eyes were greeted by the outward symbols of mercy; and at the far end of the big church, before the altar-rail, an elderly priest was discoursing to a small semicircle of children. In the blue shadow of the great window behind him, we could see his head and the white movements of his hands; and, though we could only hear a word or two, from time to time, above the mingling echoes of his voice, we knew by the music of its modulations that he must be a born *raconteur*.

Every tone that might attract and fasten the attention of his little hearers was employed for the narrative—humour, confidence, awe, and, every now and then, a moment's silence, perhaps a question or two, and then an '*eh, bien*,' and so once more into the story. There had been

such a pause at our entrance; and more than once, as we stood at the back of the church, we saw the dark heads turning towards us, only to be summoned round again by a gentle cough and the exquisite wheedle—it is quite impossible to reproduce it—of that '*eh*, *bien*—and so the good S. Pierre . . .'

And yet even here, we knew, it was still present—that imprisoning aura of observation. Tempered and transmuted by the nature of the ancient building in which we stood, it still held us, as it were, scanned and separate. We were as unincluded in this town's sanctuary as anything that had been burned in its market-place; and, with our return to it, and the dropping of darkness upon its streets, the very smiles that were being hidden from us might have flickered round those old faggots. Even the houses, indeed, as night touched them, seemed to have dropped a century or two and drawn closer; and our last vision before dinner, in the coppery dusk of the courtyard, was of a row of faces pressed against the railings.

II

That was our last vision before dinner, and, save in so far as it was pushed away from us by the tattered walls of the *salle à manger*, it re-

mained present with us through all the courses of the meal. It hung upon the air like the invasion of some spiritual fog from outside, and for the first time we seemed to read its definite recognition in the eyes of the other persons in the room. These, apart from the daughter and a little serving-maid (who fled in panic from Justin's French), were but five in number—a group of two, and a group of three, separated both from ourselves and each other by rows of forlorn, unlaid tables, and conversing together in lowered, husky voices. Even the room itself, a great, high-ceilinged apartment occupying the whole of one wing of the building, appeared to be aware of that external menace, but with a sort of cowed and half-inanimate nonchalance, as though its spirit, by nature a little pompous, had been long ago broken and discredited. The only dignity, indeed, that had been left to it—the faded portrait of a dead colonel of cuirassiers—had been stabbed as by a sword in two or three vital places; and, for the rest, its walls were merely the agents of various advertising firms. Even the clock was an advertisement; and now, as we consumed our dinner, its ticking, at the far end of the room, was the loudest sound to be heard in it.

So the meal proceeded, well enough cooked, but with long pauses at each stage; and it was during one of these that our eyes were first arrested by the two groups of our fellow-diners, and the rather curious arrangement by which they were thus dining so far apart. For, as we now perceived, on regarding them more closely, they had made up a party in a small automobile that had driven up to the hotel just as we had sallied out to the church—a pretty girl, very pale, with rather elaborate, light-coloured hair; an elderly man who might easily have been her father; a tall and very dark-skinned priest, and the two younger men who were now separated from them by thirty or forty feet of floor-space. What, under these circumstances, their relations might be, we found it very hard to determine; and to the prevailing mystery of the atmosphere they now seemed to contribute by every movement. Thus, before dinner was over, one of the two men at the little table rose abruptly, and left the room without a sign; while shortly afterwards the second, approaching the other three diners, spoke a few words to them, shook hands with each, and finally vanished after his companion. Then a servant, whose face was new to us, entered, and touched the elderly man

upon the shoulder. The *messieurs*, he said, were awaiting him upstairs. And the elderly man, rising in his turn, and without noticing the girl, shook hands with the priest and departed.

But for ourselves now and the priest and girl at the opposite end of the room the great *salle* remained deserted for perhaps half an hour, during which time the other two became engrossed in an earnest and gesticulative conversation, first at their own table, but for the last ten minutes or so, standing face to face near one of the courtyard windows. Then, with a quite unexpected, and what seemed to us an almost passionate movement, the girl ran across to the bell, and, having called the servant, pulled out her purse, and apparently paid for the dinner; after which the two of them quickly left the room, the tall priest lifting his hand a little as he passed us.

Had the girl been crying? Had we been witnessing a tragedy, or merely some little crisis of travel? We could not tell; and we never saw her again. But next morning, under a sky of glory, the priest was the pleasantest fellow imaginable; and the daughter of the house pinned an orange-blossom into Sophronia's blouse.

CHAPTER XI

BELVÈS TO LALINDE

I

It was a sky of glory. We had run out of tobacco. Our letters and kit-bag were awaiting us. And for these reasons we had resolved somehow to reach Lalinde before the evening. This was a small town upon the Dordogne about twenty miles away across country, and where the married nephew of our dear *Madame* at Beynac kept, we had been told, the principal hotel. To him had been transmitted not only our bag but a little parcel of sun-bleached linen and a letter from *Madame* and her son, apprising him of our arrival; and we left Belvès, therefore, in higher spirits and with a pleasant sense of anticipation.

Moreover, as though the friendliness to which we were looking forward at our journey's end had sped a ray or so to lend warmth to its beginning, the son of the house, a young man whom we had not previously seen, kindly set out with us upon the forest road to Cadouin—a little

village some eight or nine miles distant, and nearly half-way to our proposed destination. For about a mile he accompanied us, an agreeable and courteous companion, well liked, as we saw, by the old ladies and little children whom he saluted, and tenderly disposed towards certain aspects of religious observance. Thus he lifted his hat with a genuine reverence as we passed the tiny cemetery outside the town; and when presently he explained to us the nature of the holy relic that was kept at Cadouin, it was with a sincere belief both in its origin and its permanent spiritual value.

We were now approaching perhaps the largest stretch of forest that we had yet passed through, flooding the high tableland on either side of us with stunted oak and bracken, and swept this morning by so strong a west wind that we could almost smell in it the salt air of the sea. That may have been imagination, the fruit of its contrast with the mephitic air of yesterday, seeing that the coast was still ninety miles away. But it was hard to believe, as it buffeted towards us down this rough forest road, in those dark phenomena that had seemed so close to us last night.

For if this forest were medieval, well, so was

every cousin to it in Europe—just as in America, so Justin asserted, they were either primordial or real estate. And its medievalism was no more than the jolly boyhood of a continent. There were no vapours in it. Nothing maligner than Puck had ever pushed aside its ferns. And its lawlessness, where it had been lawless, had been of the blood and not of the spirit. Even to-day, indeed, it might well have been sheltering some Gascon Robin or Friar Tuck; and, as we pressed deeper into it, it would have been hard to say that we did not hear the twang of a cross-bow. Other figures, too, it must have witnessed—squires and their pages pricking to tourney; and at least one, upon a stranger mission, must have threaded it as far as to Cadouin. For to Cadouin or close by, after the first crusade, there had been brought from Antioch Saint-Suaire—the sacred cloth that had once been laid upon the face of Christ. A poor clerk, as the legend asserts, brought it home with him to Périgord, hidden in the barrel that contained his drink; and, after many adventures, it was still here, so our guide this morning had informed us, and was carried in procession every September before an assemblage of pilgrims.

But, for the rest, Cadouin lay in peace, even

as we saw it now, a green oasis in mid-forest, round its fine, old church ; and also renowned, we were told, in a quieter fashion, for its *volailles aux salsifis*. Many other things, too, were grown here on a tiny, industrious scale—wheat and rye and maize and tobacco ; while the village itself, with its white walls and sunny, tranquil streets, was as strange a contrast as could have been imagined with the huddled town in which we had slept.

By this time it was about noon, and we were confronted with the two alternatives of turning northward for four miles to le Buisson, where we should be able to pick up the afternoon train to Lalinde ; or continuing on foot by various cross-country paths for the remaining nine miles of our journey. But with the day as it was, at once so cool and brilliant, the question became purely academic ; and, after a few enquiries as to the nature of two or three possible routes, we found ourselves embarked again down a pretty, winding valley.

Here we consumed, about half an hour later, the cheese and wine that we had carried from Belvès ; and, having shared between us the last grains of our tobacco, settled down once more under our lightened packs. We were now

making north-west to the second Calès of our travels, a village some five miles distant on the south bank of the river; and, in its own way, this road was as lovely, perhaps, as any that we had tramped. For while we were still surrounded, as our map showed us, by several leagues of forest, it held us so faithfully to this broadening glade that these were now quite invisible to us. We had had our romance in the young morning, as was very meet and right. Now in the afternoon we were to behold labour, and say if we found it less beautiful.

How many workers we actually saw it would be a little hard to tell—probably less than four dozen altogether. But, in comparison with the country that we had been passing through, this whole valley appeared to be thronged with them. In every gesture of toil we beheld them, backs down above the hay, turning and tossing it, or building it into cocks, or pitching great forkfuls on to the wagons. Men and women, they shared alike, with childhood and age for the lighter tasks; and there was a deeper grace, surely, in their movements than in those of any faun that had ever danced. Nor were we sure even that the loss to the women of a girlish beauty that might otherwise have lingered was altogether

too great a price for this sterner, outdoor comradeship—a comradeship that suggested, at any rate, a possible sunning and salting of certain rather dangerous front-parlour tendencies. *L'après-midi d'une faneuse*—we commend the theme to M. Debussy.

II

This was on the road to Calès, but to Calès itself, as it turned out, we never drew nearer than the foot of its hill, for, as we came in sight of it, our road swung suddenly to the left; and five minutes later, to our surprise and great joy, we were staring down upon the broad ribbon of the Dordogne. This was now greater by the volume of the Vézère—that ancient tributary by whose banks the million-year-old boy was found sleeping, and for whose waters we had yearned with little Marian and Priscilla; and although the Dordogne here was so shallow that we could almost have waded across it, its shores must have been three hundred yards apart.

As though foreshadowing, too, the call to action, that was waiting for all that vigour, the whole country here was already and, as we

found, permanently changing. The hills and forests across the river had slipped under a garment of meadows—a gentler and more harnessed district, dotted with farms and fruit-trees. And though at our left the crags were still dripping with maiden-hair fern and mountain bushes, it was only to retreat, in the course of a mile or two, behind a similar invasion.

Here beside the river we presently found, in the little hamlet of Badelot, what must surely have been the smallest church in Périgord; and, at the back of it, down a steep lane, the signpost of an alleged café. This proved on entrance to be no more than a rather dingy parlour, soon lightened, however, by friendly faces; and here we obtained some coffee that was at least warm and liquid, and a sponge-cake or two a trifle harder to absorb. From the strictly catering point of view, in fact, almost any Englishwoman could have done better; but both cakes and coffee were set before us with so smiling a welcome that it would have been quite impossible for us not to enjoy them. And, after our fourteen miles across country, it was very pleasant to sit at ease there, and talk to *Madame* about her various children.

These had been many, we learned, and two

of them were present—little Jeanne, aged eight, and a baby of fifteen months, who was now slumbering on the floor. This was a girl also, and she was embedded—there was no other way of describing it—in the moiety of a wooden cylinder, being further strapped for security. And when she awoke, as she shortly did, owing to Justin's failure to perceive her—and when a vigorous rocking by her elder sister failed to stifle her sobs—she was picked up, and applied, cradle and all, for food and comfort to her mother's breast.

This released little Jeanne who was also given her afternoon meal, a loaf of bread and a large bowl of salad, to which was presently added, as she sat in the doorway, a handful of cherries by a small boy admirer. She was herself, indeed, like nothing so much as a cherry, ruddy and shining, with oval, saucy black eyes ; and though, for the moment, it was merely observant, her face was as cheeky as a bedroom jug. Her father, too, who had been the first to bid us enter, now re-appeared visibly masticating a large portion of bread and cabbage. He had blue eyes, and, when we came to think of it, Caledonian cheek-bones ; and, as he assured us, had often believed himself to be of British extraction. For, apart

from his features, there was his surname, borne by no other man in France, and that was obviously derived from a river, the just pride of Scotland. And even if this were not so—well, that was no very great matter, seeing that *comme Angleterre* France was an intelligent and well-civilized nation. Altogether, as he himself informed us, he was a philosopher of some standing, and, as he shook hands with us, was no less interested than *Madame* in the now repellent topic of Sophronia's stays.

This was about four o'clock, and, from Badelot onwards, we were surrounded by the utmost fertility, the road itself being lined in turn with acacias, cherry trees, and poplars, and the fields on either side of it devoted apparently to every species of small farming. Lettuces, wheat, and artichokes; potatoes, vines, and tobacco—every available inch was yielding fruit after its kind, with broad-hatted men and women hoeing the rows, and watering the seedlings, and sometimes pausing for a moment to stare at us as we passed.

There was no doubt, however, as to their friendliness; and both the women and the men were as instinct with health as any that had greeted us—the former especially, with clear,

glowing skins, and legs and feet that would have gladdened the heart of every studio in Chelsea. All the way along, too, as though to beckon us to this land of honey and fatness, we could see, across the river, the graceful spire of Lalinde—flattered, it was true, by distance and its changing frame of poplars, but lending its aid to the last miles of our journey.

III

They had shrugged their shoulders at Beaulieu when we talked about Lalinde. The burly gentleman, at whose expense we had drunk to the *Entente Cordiale*, had even told us that after Sarlat we might as well take train down to Bordeaux. And yet at that moment Lalinde bestowed upon us precisely the gifts that we most wanted—quiet streets, spotlessly clean, and decently mellowed by time; fragrant squares, planted with elms, for its market-place and *salle d'armes;* and, opposite the latter, comfortably basking in its shirt-sleeves, the white-walled hotel that contained our washing and our kit-bag.

Like all havens, however, of the peace that

can be felt, it had not been won without its moment of storm. And it now became necessary to summon the aid of our host in a predicament that up to the present had been too much for us. For, while at Rocamadour and Sarlat the presentation of a visiting-card had immediately sufficed to procure us our letters, here at Lalinde the sterner lady who presided at the post-office had flatly refused to accept this evidence. We had not an addressed envelope. We had not a passport. She could not understand why we had not a passport. And *cartes-de-visites* were no evidence of identity. Anybody in the world, as she pointed out to us, might procure a *carte-de-visite*. And the mere fact—or our statement of it—that ours had previously been considered genuine had no bearing, so far as she was concerned, upon the matter. She would even read out to us from her Book of Instructions the very paragraph in which it was stated that *cartes-de-visites* must in no wise be regarded.

But what did she suggest then ?

She suggested nothing. It was not her duty to suggest.

If we guessed the postmarks on the letters ?

That would not move her in the least.

Then would nothing move her ?

She had told us—an addressed envelope or a passport.

But we had neither!

That was not her fault.

Would a receipt suffice?

It would not.

Did she then propose, we enquired bitterly, to guard our letters for all eternity?

She did not smile.

'*Ça dépend.*'

She returned again to her duties.

But it was by now obvious to us that we had at least gained the gentler sympathies of her two assistants; and we approached her once more from another and more human angle.

The letters, we assured her, might be important. We were ignorant foreigners in a hospitable land. If we had transgressed rules, we were desolated, but we had transgressed them in innocence. And, if we had not an envelope, we at least had a letter—here it was—Dear Mr. Visiting-card.

But even this appeal, or as much of it as overflowed into her understanding, had failed to shake her from what was now her rather heated standpoint; and, in the end, to our dismay and, it must be confessed, deep indignation, we had

been compelled to abandon our letters, and retire from her throne-room empty-handed. Had we encountered her in Belvès she would certainly have broken our hearts; and we should have fled into the outer darkness whatever the time of night. But here at Lalinde, and in the midst, even, of our most lurid profanity, we knew instinctively that she was not typical of the place. Heaven and her Government had placed her here for their own inscrutable purposes; and, when we set eyes upon our host, we drank confidence again like nectar.

Slim and debonair, with a trim moustache and the most glittering of pince-nez; clad in a white jacket, and exhaling vivacity from every centimetre of his person, there was not a postmistress in the world, we felt, who could have resisted him for a moment. He would sweep her like a tornado. He would melt her to tears. He would freeze her to ice. He would shrivel her to ashes. With equal aplomb he might have just completed the removal of an appendix or a *pêche Melba*. He might have won a verdict, or pinked his man, or played d'Artagnan at the Châtelet. A mere postmistress? His eyes flashed fire. He tore the label from our kit-bag. Followed by the eyes of half

Lalinde, we sped like doom down the lazy street. The postmistress called up her reserves, and reproduced her book of rules; glared at us quite frankly now with hatred, but from an obviously weakening position; and ultimately yielded to us a postcard and a copy of last Saturday's newspaper. She had been a good fighter. She was almost a great one; and, though she may have been alien to Lalinde, she could scarcely have been less than an Assistant-Controller at S. Martin's-le-Grand in London.

And, for the rest, Lalinde received us like the placid lady that she is—not accustomed to, or anxious for, but benignly hospitable to strangers; existing chiefly for her own people and their domestic needs, depending not at all upon ruins (she has only a thirteenth-century brick gateway and a tiny, destroyed church across the river), but at once long-suffering, and dignified, and gracious. She has a new *mairie*, too, that you may admire if you will, and a canal that is her pride. Her elderly women will nod pleasantly to you from their shady doorways. Her younger boys will display the gudgeon that they have captured from her waters. And her *gendarmes* will sit beside you and discuss the souls of nations, venturing the opinion that in God's good time

lion and lamb will lie down together. Moreover, for the restoration of Justin, who had hoped to find a review of his last novel, and had discovered instead an enthusiastic column about an inferior one (being American)—for the restoration of Justin, and for the first time since we had left England, roast pork was laid before us in a lordly dish. It was a fitting climax to the day, and, having disposed of it, we wandered out again, following the canal where a forlorn man sat washing his feet or catching leeches, and listening to the frogs, and talking, among other things, of heaven. We even built a heaven for our postmistress where she should be Postmistress-in-Chief, with five deputies beneath her, who should each in turn have five assistants. She should have a book of rules—so we arranged—with six hundred pages, and each rule should have given birth to eight clauses with sub-divisions. Nor should there be, we agreed, a solitary exception to any one of them. And a blunderer from Hades should infringe them every day.

IV

No one had told us that upon the next day there was to be a fair at Lalinde ; and it must therefore have been *le bon Dieu*—the merciful Father of vagabonds—who had seen to it on our behalf, and guided us hither to be in time for it. Even after breakfast, though it was true that we did not finish this before ten o'clock, it was quite clear to us that there were affairs on foot. The *salle d'armes* was already well filled with people, bustling groups of black-frocked, white-capped dames, with boys and drovers flowing between them, pursuing calves and oxen, and vehicles of all sorts beginning to gather from the villages. This would in itself probably have decided us to remain another day in Lalinde, had we not already overnight come to the same decision ; and, when we crossed the bridge, with our lunch in our pockets, it was to meet a steady tide of baskets containing cheese and butter and carefully packed live fowls. Our immediate object, however, was to find if possible a quiet place for a bathe, and for this reason we had chosen the irregular, south-of-the-river road in preference to the *rue nationale* recommended by our host. This was a fine thoroughfare *très*

ombrageuse, with plump trees on either side of it, joining Lalinde to Bergerac some twelve miles down-stream, and now occupied by a procession of wagons, and traps, and motor-bicycles. But, though we had avoided this, searching for privacy, it became increasingly difficult to find a bathing-place, the banks shelving down under thick foliage that swept the surface of the water, and preventing us, for as far as we cared to walk, from finding a comfortable approach to it.

This was not very far, the day being hot, and the softer atmosphere taking hold of us; and, having achieved little beyond the exploration of the next village upon the river, and disturbing a particularly large snake lying asleep upon a stone, we found ourselves lunching again at last almost opposite Lalinde. We had missed our bathe. We had trespassed unnecessarily. We had pushed our useless way through many bushes. And it was during this meal that Justin ate more than his due share of eggs and cheese. He was not to blame for this, since, as he explained, his muse had been occupying his brain; and, while he was sorry to have reduced the rest of us to consuming some pemmican-like sausage, he himself was not feeling quite so well as he would have liked.

Since there is nothing, however, more infectious than sunshine and the health of other people; and since the little town, as we returned to it, radiated these from every corner, his spirits began gradually to rise from zero to subnormal—recovering, as he assured us, their London level (not a very high one) by four o'clock; and perhaps lifted a fraction above this by our afternoon coffee. The whole market-place was now thronged with every kind of merchandise—many-coloured garments, hats and handkerchiefs, geese, ducks, and toys for the children. And, as we moved about, hunting for some sabots to take home to Pandora, the busy community was too concerned or naturally courteous to notice us. Nor was there a sign anywhere of the drunkenness that would have been so inevitable in England. We had only seen, indeed, throughout our travels, a single inebriated person. And even he, as he shook hands with us, had assured us that he was a tourist—like ourselves. Possibly on account, too, of the outlying hay or other demands of the surrounding farms, from five o'clock onwards there was a rapid thinning of the crowd—a gentle process of dissolution, entirely congruous with the town's spirit, and that left it by nine to the June silence and the nightly chorus of the frogs.

V

While the town, however, was thus as quiet almost as though a fair had never been, far from this was the little room to which we had repaired for dinner, and that was presently shared with us by three knights (as we supposed) of commerce. These were men of towns in tall white collars, and with irreproachable table manners—outwardly, at any rate, far more polished than any commercials that we had yet encountered, and inclined at first, from deference to ourselves, to speak in husky monosyllables. How long they would have done this, and whether their temperaments could have carried them thus to the meal's end, we shall never know, since Justin deemed it his duty to set them at their ease, opening fire with the delicate suggestion that perhaps the *messieurs* spoke his language. This they denied with a unanimity that was rather a clap than a response; and, though it was followed by a brief rain of apologies, as an opening it merely proved to us that they were eloquent fellows. That might have sufficed. Sophronia thought so. For it was a hot night; and we had shown ourselves friendly. But Justin's philanthropy was now thoroughly aroused; and

he ventured once more into the unknown with the proposed three-years' military service. It was a dangerous move. Prior to his kindliness, the poor gentlemen had at least seemed cool. And now he had divided them into three camps with an almost Olympian suddenness—number one being an intellectual, with powerful Socialist sympathies; number two, a swarthy person with a fierce moustache, a crusted Tory; and the third, a phlegmatic but rather cynical young gentleman, who, like Gallio, cared for none of these things.

Not only, therefore, were two of them thus bitterly set at variance, but the attitude of the third was equally annoying to them both; while the mental temperature of the room, hitherto well below its physical, was now mounting by degrees at a stride. We lay back frankly aghast, and even Justin seemed a little dashed by the forces that he had set hurtling across the table; and this original tornado was as nothing to that let loose by a side-issue some seven or eight minutes later. What this was, in the clash of syllables and the hammering of plates upon the table, we had not the smallest idea, inwardly praying against bloodshed. And it was not until out hostess intervened with a peaceful

interlude of artichokes that its nature was disclosed to us by number one. Even in its disclosure it led once more to a lesser repetition of the storm, the florid Conservative asserting that, if an aeroplane's engines stopped in mid-air, the aviator who had been driving them fell immediately to his destruction; while his Socialist *confrère*, protesting vehemently against this dogmatic assertion, illustrated the principle of the vol-plane with his knife and fork. Not only, he said, was aeroplaning already perfectly safe, but in another year or two an aeroplane would be far more trustworthy than an express. Than an express, *Monsieur?* Number two leapt to his feet, and recited names. What of *Monsieur* A, and *Monsieur* B, and *Monsieur* C, and *Monsieur* D? Had they not all said precisely what *Monsieur* was saying at this moment? And where were they? They were dead, *Monsieur*—dead and destroyed by aeroplanes. He dropped into his seat, and wiped his forehead, and drank some wine, and glared at his foe. Number three said that, as for himself, he preferred to stick to his *moutons*. And since this question of mortality had leapt incontinent from that of arms, Justin hazarded the belief that the era of warfare was now drawing, perhaps, to its close. Was it not

true, he urged, that *les plus savants* of all countries were really brethren; that frontiers had ceased to be of interest to them; and that where they stood to-day the rest of humanity would probably stand to-morrow?

But, if Justin had believed this to be an olive-branch, it was his last and greatest error. For though it had certainly united them, it was in so appalling an opposition that both the *bonne* and our host came rushing headlong into the room. Singly and in echelon and in massed battalions they thundered negation at him from every standpoint. Flushed and on their feet, and with even Gallio lifted for the moment from his lethargy, they explored and shattered and utterly razed the wretched Justin to the ground.

They slapped their foreheads. Was war of the intellect? They smote their waistcoats. It was an *affaire de cœur*. For any man with sensibilities higher in grade than a potato's, there were conditions, they yelled, under which death was infinitely preferable to life—such conditions as had always rendered, and to the world's end would still render, the declaration of war a never-out-of-sight liability.

But by this time not only themselves, but we and the windows were visibly streaming; and

Justin, admittedly demolished, besought them to stay their violence. It even defeated, as he pointed out with weak and helpless gestures, their own unanswerable logic, since we were too deaf to understand it. Whereupon they collapsed suddenly into smiles, and bowed to each other and to ourselves, and lifted their glasses, and assured us that it was merely their fiery, Gascon way.

It was a happy apology, and happier still in that it reminded us of Cyrano. For was not Bergerac close at hand, and had they not all seen Coquelin in the part? Could they not quote, also, and correct one another, and toss their *panaches*, and quote again? Why, who better? —until at last, as we turned our eyes towards the clock, we discovered that our seven-o'clock dinner had lingered on till nearly ten.

CHAPTER XII

LALINDE TO MUSSIDAN

I

Fair Lalinde—there was to come an hour wherein we wished bitterly that we had never left you! But it was not yet. And the next morning, intending to breakfast at Bergerac, we rose at six o'clock in order to be in time for the early train. This we had resolved to take, partly to avoid a twelve-mile tramp down the *rue nationale*, and partly because we had already surveyed from the higher ground across the river most of the country through which we should have to pass. It would also place us at a reasonable hour within fourteen miles or so of Mussidan, a little town on the river Isle where we hoped to spend the night.

We had no particular reason for selecting Mussidan, save that it would reveal a new tributary of the Dordogne, and appeared to be a convenient place of halt *en route* to a yet further river, the Dronne. And, in common with most of our plans, it had excited no local enthusiasm.

The day was fine, however. The little train, with the summer blowing through its windows, proved to be the pleasantest of vehicles for an early morning jaunt. And, as we neared Bergerac, it became filled with brown-skinned travellers to market—men and women roughly clad, but with impeccable linen, and discussing the duties that lay before them with sobriety and mirth.

Every Saturday, so we were told, there was a market held at Bergerac ; but, on this particular one, to the usual commercial activities were being added others in preparation for the morrow. For to-morrow, we learned, there was to be a *fête* in honour of Bergerac's patron saint. Poles of tricolour were being embedded in stalwart tubs of earth, and strings of pennants unfolded to flaunt across the streets. As for the town itself, so far as we could gather from a brief sojourn in it of an hour, it was one of quiet prosperity and some importance in the neighbourhood, flatly situated on the Dordogne in a well-cultivated region, and paying homage to a large and finely proportioned church.

It was near to this, after a little search, that we found a hotel for breakfast, where our orders for eggs and jam and further provisions for lunch-time caused some amusement to a small French

midshipman, who was discussing a chicken with his mother. He was a pretty boy who would have liked to talk to us had he been surer of our respectability; and, from his attitude to the mirror, he was still on flirting terms with his uniform.

But by now the day was promising to be as hot, and in a far more humid country, as any of the days that we had experienced during our first week in Corrèze; and we were not sorry, therefore, to turn our backs on bricks and mortar, even at the price of a very protracted and shadeless exit from the town.

With this difficulty of exit, too, and the apparition before us of a housed and docile landscape, we seemed definitely to have entered, and with reluctant hearts, upon the last stages of our journey. It was now a fortnight since the train from Brive had toiled into the mountains with us from Tulle; and we had just despatched our kit-bag to Bordeaux where we must rejoin it by Thursday night. Moreover, about four miles north of Bergerac, and at the opening before us of alternate roads, Sophronia suddenly made the announcement that she was not feeling in her usual health, and that she had been in pain, indeed, most of last night. Why this

should have been so she was at a loss to explain, unless she might hold the pemmican responsible. And, though she was quite well enough, she declared, to walk the rest of the distance into Mussidan, we decided it wiser to bear to the right into the little valley beside the railway.

This was a branch line tortuously connecting Bergerac and Mussidan ; and, though the road that accompanied it was more circuitous than the other, this latter appeared to be striking through a forest, and would certainly not carry us near a station. So we marched on with chastened hearts, relieving Sophronia of her pack, and through a country that never failed in a certain tilled and domestic charm. But for the absence of any mansions or even substantial farm-houses, we might have been threading our way through some English midland county ; and it was at a tiny hamlet, unnamed upon our map, that we were presently stopped by an elderly lady who wished to examine our merchandise.

She was carrying a hay-fork, and just for a moment we failed to understand her demand. But when we had done so, and fully explained to her our foolish reasons for carrying bags, her astonishment was at least tenfold our own. It was so great that her husband was immediately

summoned in a loud voice, and presently appeared —a spare little fellow, and the first clean-shaven peasant that we had seen. He, too, was carrying a fork, and had a humorous face like a jockey's, and with the same admixture in his blue eyes of shrewdness, innocence, and cunning. It must surely cost, he surmised, *beaucoup d'argent*, such an unprofitable excursion. And when we assured him no, he shook his head, and glanced at his wife for confirmation. And we were walking to Maurens? Certainly to Maurens, and very possibly to S. Jean d'Eyrand. And we had come from Bergerac? Yes, from Bergerac. But when we were at home? Why, we lived in Londres. *Londres?* He glanced at his wife again. Londres? Yes, he seemed to have heard of it.

It was by now past eleven o'clock; we had risen at six; and the heat, already great, was sensibly waxing at every step. After another mile, therefore, we decided to camp in the fringe of a copse beside the road; and it was here that our thin world cracked, and revealed to us the gulfs of our mortality. For Justin, who, with villainous forethought, had been travelling about with a clinical thermometer, now discovered Sophronia's temperature to be no less than 100 degrees. And for a few moments we stared

grimly into a black and treacherous sunshine. Having upbraided Sophronia, however, for her deception of us there was no further time, we thought, for delay, since, by a great effort, it seemed just possible that we might catch the afternoon train at Maurens. Nor can it be denied that, for the next hour or two, the waters of *heimweh* passed over us. Only that morning we had left good friends, to whom distance and the heat of travelling and a certain pride forbade our returning. And now, stricken with actual, and even more so by potential disease, we were as dust in a strange land, knowing not whither we should be blown. For the fearful mile of our sprint from our quiet camp to Maurens station, Typhoid and Cholera gasped beside us with poor, heavy-eyed Sophronia—and, when at last, with a minute to spare, we staggered upon the platform, there can have been few pleaders before Providence more genuine than we.

But we had caught the train; and though the unknown still lay dark before us, this was lightened somewhat in the persons of an old lady and a little girl—the latter of whom, by what must surely have been a miracle, proving to be of precisely the same age as Pandora. It was an inspiring circumstance. It would have been so

at any time. But it was trebly so now. And when presently, having arrived at Mussidan, we were patiently waiting in the rickety omnibus, it was this same old lady and her grand-niece who climbed up to share it with us.

It must have been the hottest omnibus on earth, though an excellent fomentation for Sophronia ; and it was further occupied, before we left the station, by a younger and more fashionably dressed woman. She was less demonstrative, but like her friend had a peculiarly gentle expression ; and to our great joy, as we drew up at the hotel, we found that she was to be one of our hostesses. Whether she was hostess-in-chief we never discovered, since this hotel more than any other seemed to be managed as a sort of family hobby, the reins of government being held alternately by a grandmother, a son, and this present lady, while there was also a sister or step-sister who occasionally appeared to be taking charge. But to the last woman of them they proved to be kindness incarnate ; and to the stern *bonne* who wore herself out for us we have since vowed a hundred candles.

She it was who first led us to Sophronia's bedroom—a cool and lofty apartment looking down through an open window upon a pergola

of vine, and, beyond that, into a pellucid stream, a little tributary of the Isle. We made discoveries about this afterwards that somewhat robbed it of its charm, and notably in view of the fact that it had yielded perch for our dinner. But now the bubbling of it below the vine leaves was better than a nurse for our patient; and for its music, and the room above it, and the sweet-faced women of the hotel, three persons, at any rate, have hidden Mussidan in their hearts.

II

But while to ourselves in our extremity Mussidan thus became holy ground, to the world at large, as we soon discovered, it was merely a place to be motored through—set on a main road between Bordeaux and the north-east, and a convenient repository for petrol. *Assez gentil*—that was as far in description as even its own inhabitants would venture; though at the time this was more than all that we could have asked of any place. *Assez gentil*—and we are quite content to let that stand for Mussidan, arranged in peace upon its crescent of the Isle.

This was a sluggish river that reflected rather than entangled light, and stood to the Dordogne

much as the Ouse might be said to stand to the Thames; but only by those who have learned to love it in its unpopular Bedfordshire lowlands.

There was a glowing hour, indeed, between six and seven, that would have delighted the heart of Bunyan, with the last of the hay across the river being slowly gathered by ox-carts, and every shadow cut out as by scissors from the golden satin of the fields. Beyond these again and the melting villages, the horizon was no more than a frill of woodland; and, a little to the right, in the sunny corner below the bridge, a dozen boys had just begun to bathe. For the most part they were rosily naked, diving from one of the low stone piers, but others, more decorously clad, were soaping their chests in the tepid water.

So we wandered about, praying for Sophronia, and smoking our pipes in Mussidan's suburbs; and found its distillery and its *abattoir*, and watched its proprietors among their vegetables. And in due course, having gleaned comfort, we returned to the hotel for our dinner, and found that this had been served for us in Sophronia's bedroom, and that Sophronia was feeling better, and had slept. She was so much better, indeed, that we fed her with perch and even, less wisely perhaps, with *pâté de foie gras*. But she fell

asleep again, none the worse apparently, and we descended with happier hearts to the terrace.

This fronted the street, and was plentifully dusted by the motor-cars of the wealthy; and, as we sat talking here, there was driven by a train of donkeys from the Pyrenees. They were being urged forward, with strange cries, by their Béarnaise drivers, and were carrying bales of crockery and coloured fabrics and tobacco. The whole family seemed to be gathered here to-night, courteously anxious about poor *Madame*. They had found such English, they said, as had been belated here, *très agréable*, though not very eloquent. The *patron* had a son who had spent a year or two in Canada; and the *belle-sœur*, a younger boy who was at school in Eastbourne. This latter was unhappily still away from home, or we should have been able to observe for ourselves the purity of his English accent. But the son from Canada, who was now managing a branch café opposite the station, presently appeared with a friend, and was introduced to us. He was a gay youth, and it was at his invitation that we repaired to another café up the street, where, behind little glasses of brandy, we discussed the world, but chiefly its women. Thus the girls of Canada, as we learned from him, he had found

to be *très, très jolies*, but his own—the ungallant fellow—a trifle too *brunes*. He informed us also of the probable reason why our nationality was so generally perceived, though the driver of the bus, it appeared, had told the *patron* that we were Americans. It was because '*ces Messieurs* 'ad no moustaches, and *Madame* carried ze walking-steek.'

But by now it was half-past nine, which is an hour when even dissipated Périgord thinks of bed; and we strolled back with him down the quiet street, bidding him good-night at the hotel door. Here we found that the rest of the family had already retired to their places; but that two of the serving-maids, handsome girls, were taking the night air with a couple of admirers. They, also, we were glad to learn, as we lingered chatting with them for a few moments, had formed a pleasant estimate of English travellers. And it was obvious to us that our little excursion up the street with the *jeunesse dorée* had invested us with a certain new significance. We had been initiated, as it were. We had seen life. Did we not find Mussidan gay?

CHAPTER XIII

MUSSIDAN TO MONPONT

I

Réveillez vous ma mie Annette,
Et mettez vos plus beaux habits,
C'est aujourd'hui grand jour de fête,
Grand jour de fête du pays.

THIS was the great day for Mussidan, although the actual *fête* was at a village a mile and a quarter hence; and, when we had descended for our coffee, half the town had apparently departed thither. For ourselves, however, and with Sophronia happily normal but still languid, we were well content to lounge at ease upon the shadowy terrace of the hotel, and to watch and to be stared at by the merry *fête*-goers as they passed. We even abandoned at a sufficiently early hour our original intention of visiting the *fête*—just as we abandoned a moment later a fatiguing proposal of Sophronia's that we should walk the ten miles to Monpont. For we had all come, as we pointed out to her, through a dark

stratum of mental stress. Happy was the day, we had learned, that had no history; and such a day, we hoped, would be this. And, if we went to Monpont at all, it should be at our ease, and upon the mid-afternoon train. So we lingered over our cups, and watched the donkey-carts crowded with perspiring, joyful families, and the pedestrians carrying their wine and little baskets of bread and salad—and presently, when these had diminished to occasional ones and twos, the quivering air at the white street-corners and the tropical blue of the sky.

The hotel had been left to-day in charge of the *grandmère*, a clear-eyed, aquiline old lady; and it was pleasant to observe, as she sat at her knitting, one and another fresh-faced woman run up the steps to kiss her cheeks, and be kissed. Many of these were friends, but some relations, and to one resplendent young mother we had the honour of an introduction. About half-past ten, too, a fresh activity began to pervade the streets, setting this time towards the tall church, from whose spire a bell was summoning to Mass. Later in the morning we walked round it, but to our English eyes its oddest features were the yellow bills pasted over its doors announcing some local horse-races.

This, and a later stroll down the avenue that accompanied the hotel brook to the river, formed the chief events of the morning—the peace of the latter being only broken by the abrupt descent from a tree of a small boy who wished to sell us an alleged diamond for the purposes of glass-cutting. Not possessing, however, at the moment, any glass that required division, we declined this offer, we hope courteously, and with regret ; whereupon the small boy—he was about fourteen—informed us that he had once worked in Paris. Here he had met, he said, several English people, but vastly preferred to dwell in Mussidan. We enquired why he had not gone with the rest of his fellow-townsmen to the *fête*. But this was too far off, he said. He had not a bicycle. And he was not going to be bothered to walk.

By now he had become surrounded with a little group of better-dressed but timider *confrères*, towards whom he evidently stood as a sort of local chieftain. Did he like fishing ? we asked. But he shook his head again. No, he couldn't be bored with fishing. Swimming then ? His eyes lit up. Now we were talking about something that really mattered. He loved swimming with all his heart. So did we in England, Justin

assured him, only to be faced with the pertinent enquiry why he had not formed, then, a member of last night's bathing-party by the bridge.

Then he turned the subject again rather abruptly.

"*Les Anglais, ils ne sont pas méchants?*"

It only became a question by a sort of nonchalant afterthought; and there was a queer light in the back of his eye. But we shook our heads with emphasis.

"*Jamais,*" we said, "*et les Français?*"

He never winked.

"*Oui, un peu, je crois.*"

He implied nothing. He stated a fact.

"*Mais les Anglais,*" he reiterated, "*aiment bien le nage?*"

Justin reassured him as to the national devotion to his favourite pastime.

"*Et en Angleterre,*" he added, "*nous aimons bien les Français.*"

The man of commerce and something more merged himself suddenly in the diplomat. He took off his hat with the profoundest motion of respect.

"*Et nous aussi—nous aimons bien les Anglais,*" and thus once more was the understanding between two great nations cemented.

There was an old man, also, with a cropped head and a skin darker than terra-cotta, who harangued the worshippers as they poured out of church. He was preaching a new world to them, and, as somebody assured us, had just been in prison for trying to throw a bomb.

II

So the day grew about us, and, but for the fact that, between three and four in the afternoon, the name of the town that we were in became altered, and the hotel smaller and more secluded, it might have been a flower blossoming and dying in some windless cloister. For Monpont was merely Mussidan once removed in tranquillity—upon the same river, even more pastoral here, and the same motor-route, but a little aside from it, and with its amenities reduced to yet simpler terms.

Thus the *garçon*, son of the house, or proprietor—we never quite determined which—whose habit it was to meet the trains in the permanent absence of a bus, carried our rücksacks in his own person, and walked beside us down the streets. It was a companionable method; and, as we proceeded, we were joined

by others of Monpont's inhabitants—a gentleman in black and two small boys who immediately invited our confidence. But while all these were interested, as they implied, in our unexpected presence on a June Sunday, their curiosity was never suffered to exceed the limits of grace. The day was at once too hot and their breeding too fine to permit even a suggestion of importunity; and, as each came to his own door, he merely detached himself without question, raising his hat, and bidding us a polite *bon voyage.*

Much of this same attitude, too, we seemed to detect in the hotel itself—a big, square house, entirely unpretentious, that we should never have found unaided. For though it was uncarpeted and black as a cave, and with a column of darkness for its central staircase, this was as appropriate a welcome as we could have desired, considering the afternoon's heat; and when, after a perilous ascent, we discovered our bedrooms, these were as clean, if not so elaborate, as those which had succoured us at Mussidan.

It was a young woman who had led us up to them; and, if she had become the wife, she was still the lover of the young man who had escorted us from the station—while there was presently evoked, from a blinded room below, the kind-

liest of dignified old ladies, who was no doubt the inevitable *grandmère*. It was one of those houses, in fact, whose inhabitants had found the fundamentals of life so grateful that an attendance to its frills was an obvious effort to them. It was so much more satisfying, for example, to a contented young man to chatter with agreeable strangers than to carry their knapsacks upstairs; and for a young woman in love to lean the while upon his shoulders than to leave an emotion untasted while she brewed some unimportant coffee. But both tasks were in the end very willingly completed; and, with the coffee drunk and some cherries consumed, the young man positively insisted on accompanying us down to the river that was the chief beauty of Monpont.

This was still the Isle, but even more rustic, if rather muddier, than at Mussidan—flowing through a landscape so fen-like that from the little bridge it became a panorama. Here again, although it was Sunday, the fields were dotted with crawling wagons; and it was here—or was it at Mussidan?—that we sat for awhile with an ancient fisherman. He was one of many, some of them dressed in beautiful, black coats and shiny collars. But he exhibited more than most,

perhaps, the indwelling spirit of S. Izaac Walton. Thus, though his wife, a hundred yards below, had just landed a two-pound perch, he bore her no malice for his own empty creel; and, when we offered him a cigarette, he merely shook his patient head, explaining that to accept it would have given him pleasure, but that he possessed no matches. So we gave him a match also, and, having tasted the tobacco, he heaved an unenvious little sigh.

"*Ah, l'Angleterre, c'est le pays riche,*" he observed.

For about two hours we wandered by the river, talking to our brethren of the rod and line, or smoking our pipes between the bushes, and staring sleepily at the water; and it was at dinner that among others we met an elderly wit whom we had seen at Mussidan.

He it was, mellowed by *vin du pays*, who now proclaimed—and we could well believe him—that not only was Périgord the loveliest and most prosperous, but (perhaps because of this) *le plus gai, le plus bon vivant* of all the departments of France. And, when presently, for the seventh time, he had enquired of Sophronia if she did not find this so, we put up Justin to make the assertion that not only were we all certain of

this, but that it had become our profoundest conviction that Périgord was the most beautiful department of the Universe, with Périgueux (where the gentleman lived), though we had not, alas, visited it, undoubtedly its most beautiful city. Whereupon he rose to his feet, and, amid the prolonged applause of the company, shook Justin's hand several times, with eyes that were visibly moist.

It was a moment of emotion; and a little later we entered another. For now, as we leaned over the bridge, this whole flat earth had become changed—had become so still that, but for its trembling, it might have swooned for very ardour, or been drowned with every dye of heaven.

CHAPTER XIV

MONPONT TO LA ROCHE CHALAIS

I

More than at most places had we found it difficult to persuade our hosts at Monpont that the object of our travels was so small a one as pleasure. They had merely smiled with incredulity, and supposed that we had the good legs; and, when next morning we set out upon the twenty kilometres to La Roche Chalais, it was amid the commiserations of the entire household.

For ourselves, however, after a day and a half of playing satellite to hotels, it was more than good to feel the road beneath our feet, even with the ten-o'clock sun already hot upon our backs, and our knapsacks none the lighter for yesterday's respite. Had the country, indeed, that lay before us promised to be like that between Mussidan and Monpont—as level as a table, almost, and very nearly as unshaded—we might well have hesitated before turning north across

the bridge. But between the Isle and the Dronne there lay a great belt of forest, to which we looked forward for a certain amount of protection.

This whole region, in fact, as we had read, was one of the wildest in France, a bad land—formerly, at any rate—of miasmic pools and fevers, and still largely unreclaimed from a sour and swampy desolation. But, although for several miles our road would lead us through this darker wilderness, for the first hour or two out of Monpont the sun took ample toll of us. Not being a *rue nationale*, though still prosperous, and depending upon accident for its trees, there were whole reaches of roadway as naked of shelter as a bone—a road that climbed upward like the sun, with a slow but relentless motion, and whereon a puff of wind or the violet shadow of a walnut tree became more precious and infinitely welcomer than rubies.

But they did come, and, with our bodies fresh, though Sophronia's still had to be nursed a little, we surmounted the low range that shut away from us the plain of the Isle, arriving presently at the village of Eygurande—a place of contentment and, as we gathered, some material comfort, but set upon the threshold of an already

changing landscape. Here haymaking was in full swing, every glen being laid under tribute; and it was at Eygurande that we found and entered one of those little shops of delight that may contain anything from a flute to a fig. It certainly contained lemonade, of which, seated upon tubs, we drank large quantities to the profit, and, we are glad to think, entertainment of the proprietors. These were a pretty woman and her husband (in this order) who, with a lady friend, all declared that they had seen no English people before, although by an amusing chance they happened to possess some English literature —the upper segment, as it turned out, of an ancient sheet of *Tit-Bits*. They also confirmed the advice of one of our fellow-guests at Monpont as to the inn that we should seek at La Roche; and we did not part company without the warmest of handshakes.

But with La Roche Chalais and this grimmer country that had now captured the road, we were approaching, we knew, the last confines of Périgord. Périgord—the very syllables, so full of music, were already sounding wistfully in our ears; and, as the forest drew itself about us, it must be confessed that we were not impervious to its gloom. For it was not a happy forest—

few pine forests are that—though there is a grave beauty of pines against the sky; and it lacked at once the solemnity of the chestnut gorges of the Upper Dordogne and the gaiety of our Cadouin Sherwood. The Forest of La Molle—it stood instead in a kind of eclectic bitterness, bleeding here and there from its trunks into the little tins of the resin-gatherers, and retreating only to make room for some yellow, stagnant lakes.

It was here that we lunched, having first of all thoroughly beaten the ground for snakes; and it was here also that Justin, who had believed himself to be in labour of a lyric, finally admitted his inability to produce it. Nor was this to be wondered at, as he pointed out to us, considering the temperature and environment, and in a lesser degree the nature of our meal. For while, as Emerson (he thought) had justly observed, an epic must be written upon bread and water, nobody in history had composed a lyric upon luke-warm lemonade—a dogmatic assertion that but for the heat we might have troubled ourselves to combat.

The heat, however, in spite of the fact that we moved under a veil of branches, was now of an intensity that had only been surpassed by

the fiery furnace of Pandrigne ; and, though we had reduced our garments to a minimum—cotton tennis shirts and flannels—and though our fat must long since have dissolved into its elements, we were perspiring at every step. It was a moot-point, indeed, and rather an absorbing one, whether it was cooler to sit down here or to go on climbing. For, in spite of the fact that all this time the road was steadily rising, it was through an atmosphere so immobile that nothing but our own movements seemed to stir it—and that hardly trembled even when at last, about two miles from La Roche, we gradually emerged upon what must have been one of the most wind-swept roads in Périgord.

But, if there was no breeze to-day, there was at least no thunder, and, though for these two miles the sun had its way with us, the very breadth of the world that we stood above lent us a certain exaltation. How far we could see from here, in an air so clear, we had no means of determining, and the dim blue in the ultimate west may not actually have been the Atlantic. But, with each plain and glen dropped for the moment out of sight, we might have been staring across a continent of tree-tops. Of every form and void of it—rippling like mail, or blent

by distance into delicate, liquid strata—they reached to horizons as far and unblurred as any that we had seen. Charente, Charente Inférieure, Gironde, Lot et Garonne, Périgord—they all lay buried there under that verdant flood; and when, an hour later, our grizzled host at the Coq d'Argent told us that round the corner was the finest view in France, his local patriotism, in this particular respect, stood at least, we felt, upon an arguable foundation.

II

Gallant mine host of the Coq d'Argent, who were we, anyway, to dispute it, or to deny priority of charm to your warm and billowy woodlands? That moony evening above Tulle; the first vision of the Dordogne; the valley of Bretenoux from Loubressac; the mountains of Auvergne from Calès; the pit of magic at Rocamadour—they might well have left you cold, and your eyes hungry for La Roche. And for ourselves, fortified within by several pints of your best coffee, we were in no mood to damn its loveliness with comparisons. We were in no mood, indeed, to do otherwise than sit at ease upon the terrace—that green mound above the Dronne behind the Institution de Jeanne d'Arc—the Mount

Nebo, blesséd and beautiful, of our wanderings in Périgord, and as pleasant a place as a man could ask for to burn tobacco before his gods. For while, from every side of this elm-crowned hill, the view was almost as wide as it had been from the roadway, there was now added to it at our feet the silvery movement of the river—a winding stream of shallow pools and waterfalls, that, directly below us, slid in foam across a weir. Just at our backs, too, lending a peculiar and placid grace to the whole, there sat upon stools in a ring some twenty or thirty little girls—pupils of Jeanne d'Arc earnestly bent above their needlework under circumstances grown too familiar, perhaps, to be distracting.

Nor were these all of our company, for presently, with a sheep apiece, there came and sat near us two old women—each apparently well over eighty—discussing their charges as if they had been rival grandchildren. They were both bent and their complexions blackened, but there was a vigour and contentment in their talk that showed their infirmities, if such they were, to be as natural as leaf-changes in autumn—as natural and, in their degree, every whit as healthy as any movement of the little boy who was now splashing so far below. But he was a broth of a boy,

as bare as a sprat, and very nearly, we guessed, as slippery—rolling and plunging through the spray like a little water-god become visible. There was such an abandon, indeed, in his merriment that we found ourselves laughing aloud; and, as though he had heard us—but this was impossible—he seemed to pause for a moment, and wave his hand. Sophronia was for running downhill to watch him, and perhaps paddle with him in the foam. But we stopped her in case, as we drew nearer, he might prove to be merely human. For, to tell the truth, we were in the mood now in which men have always gone a god-making; and the curtain of day was already twitching, with the stars on tiptoe just behind it. Moreover we had come, as it were, hand in hand, to a moment of curious significance. There was a sense in which we were standing upon our accomplished journey. There remained, at any rate, after this evening, but one final act of worship; and we were looking down, at the same time, upon the last of June and Périgord. Nay, more—for, as the Dronne was the physical boundary of the one, which of us was to say that it might not also be the mystic vanishing-point of the other? And the Boy in it? No, no, Sophronia, we could not risk his divinity.

III

So we returned instead to the Coq d'Argent for the *bon diner* that had been promised us; and that, believing us likely to be alone, our host had evidently resolved to anglicize. For though (as it turned out) there sat down with us a middle-aged, rosy traveller, it had not been modified in his favour by his express desire. Soup, followed by eggs and bacon, followed by tripe, followed by beefsteak, with cheese and walnuts bringing up the rear—such was the triumph to which we found ourselves bidden, our host with his grey poll and military moustache and ardent eyes hovering over us to instruct our enjoyment.

He need not have done this, since each dish was its own recommendation, our fellow-guest lending weight to it by the solid urbanity of his converse. Far more, indeed, than the dinner was our companion of a northern type, a slow speaker, and a man with whom it was quite inevitable to discuss theology. For, though he was not himself, as he frankly confessed to us, a man of any religion, this was largely, he explained, in protest against its confusion with ecclesiasticism. And, on the contrary, with what he held

to be the true basis of every creed, he was willing to admit himself in the profoundest sympathy. *Le bon Dieu*, he said, went by many names, but the Reverend So-and-so, he thought, was not one of them. He stared at us seriously out of his boyish, blue eyes. And we were going to Coutras? Then he could tell us, he said, of an hotel where the rooms were good, and the table—he had a little trick of laying his forefinger against his nose—the table absol*ute*ly perfect.

It was now twilight in the street outside, with the mothers standing in their doorways; and, as we sat over our coffee and liqueurs round the little table upon the pavement, we heard again, for the first time since we had listened to Chopin at the other La Roche, the sounds of a piano in an inner room behind us. Our landlord came out to us, wiping his forehead, and breathing the cooler air. That was his son, he said, who was playing the piano, and singing songs with some of his friends. He was fond of music, like his old father, and they would be so glad if we would join them—an invitation whose honour abashed us, but that presently drew us from the starlight to an inner room behind the *salle à manger*.

It was very small. It must hygienically have been entirely indefensible. And it was now filled with a shouting and perspiring company of young men, emitting tobacco smoke, and exuding energy in almost equal quantities. So aggressively masculine was the atmosphere that Sophronia would have been doubtful about entering it, had they not risen instantly to their feet, and bowed with a unanimous precision before relapsing again into their semicircle behind the piano and its player.

This was a clean-shaven young man of the vivid and nervous features that are commoner in great cities than country places; and it was quite plain that his was the energizing personality. It seemed probable, too, since he had not inherited the stolider physique of his father, that he would be paying for this to-morrow morning —and that he had already settled, indeed, many similar accounts. But for the moment, at any rate, he was the embodiment of hilarity, and it was good to behold the catholicity with which he had chosen his companions—the blue-smocked peasants cheek by jowl with the groomed dandies of the village, and the whole of them rocking to each chorus till the room trembled like a belfry. Much of what they sang we could not under-

stand, but presently they clamoured for our national anthem. And when we had played this, and they had found it grave, they overwhelmed us with the *Marseillaise*. This brought a pause and with it the entrance of yet more people from the café—two or three burly gentlemen and the wife of one of them, who discussed her babies with Sophronia. Then a song was demanded about *les Anglais*, and delivered with incredible vehemence, of which the words, we were laughingly assured, were shocking beyond description; and finally the old landlord in his white apron gave us an unaccompanied solo. Whether or not, as he himself believed, this was a real *chanson du pays*, we were none of us sufficiently scholarly to know. But as he sang it in his fine voice, and with every melancholy cadence, it might have flowered from the first hearthstone in Périgord :

Les fleurs de Mai ne partent plus la terre,
De l'alouette on n'entends plus le chant,
Et le fermier par un froid qui l'atterre,
Compte ses bœufs accroupis dans les champs,
Petits grillons, vous qui chantez dans l'âtre,
Vous ignorez les maux dont nous souffrons,
Le jour parait, et le ciel est grisâtre,
Chantez encore, chantez petits grillons,
Chantez encore, chantez petits grillons . . .

He sang it again to us the next morning; and this is not all for which we are indebted to him. For we found in our knapsacks, when we lunched, a tiny bottle of brandy and a farewell note that is beside us as we write.

CHAPTER XV

LA ROCHE CHALAIS; COUTRAS; BOURG

I

It was a good lunch, however, even apart from these. Materially speaking, it would have been difficult for us to recall a better. Wine and *pâté de foie gras aux truffes* (this with shame again, but we were carried away by the custom of the country), bread, butter, and cheese—they were all of the choicest; and, indeed, we needed them for more reasons than one. For firstly, since breakfast, we had left Périgord, perhaps for ever—*le plus gai, le plus bon vivant* of all the departments of France, to whose heart we had committed ourselves with our little language and our slender means, and that had never failed us, beating, as it does, in God's bosom. And secondly, we had lost a June that we should never find again even in heaven. And thirdly, since leaving les Eglisottes, a village devoid of beauty, we had been tramping a road of blackness—now flirting with the railway that anon would bear us back to Paris, but finally

parted from the Dronne, in whom, like fools, we had neglected to bathe.

This we had been following, more or less closely, all the morning, taking by-paths through a valley much like that of the middle Kennet, to whom the Dronne might well have been a Gallic cousin. Thus, all the way along, as we held south, there had been low, wood-crowned hills approaching or receding from the opposite bank of the river ; while for ourselves we had been threading meadows, mowed and stripped of their hay, and shining like lawns on either side of the road. It was somewhere among these that we had crossed the boundary, and entered Gironde, resting for a few minutes under a walnut tree, and pouring some of our wine out as an offering. And it was not until we reached les Eglisottes, a main-line station and apparently a depôt for coal, that we had found ourselves embarked upon what was to become, perhaps, the least pleasant stage of our pilgrimage.

But if this road had been unpleasant before lunch, it was at least doubly so afterwards, partly, no doubt, because we had feasted well rather than wisely, but chiefly on account of the peculiar grittiness of its motor-churned dust ; the rushing by, every few minutes, of a train

over the accompanying railway lines; and the fact that we were once more moving through the heavy and sun-soaked atmosphere of the plains. There was scarcely enough breeze, indeed, to stir the most feminine of the underclothing, beneath which, as it hung out to dry, we presently sat drinking at a dismal *buvette*. And, when at last all that was left of us staggered into Coutras, it was only to find ourselves, as has been foreshadowed, in the longest street of time.

Nor did it display to our haggard eyes a single grace of form or colour. Arid and treeless, and with the numbers of the houses painted in white upon little dark blue plates, it stretched before us, infinitely produced, like some tropical Chester-le-Street; and we shall not attempt to put into ink the number of hours that we spent in traversing it. Suffice it to say that in 1587 England was defeated here with some ignominy, and that we also, if anyone had pushed us, should most certainly have fallen down.

But no one did, and that should stand, perhaps, to the credit of a worthy town. For it cannot be denied, as we look back, that there was a certain truculence in our attitude. No one had asked us, for example, to enter Coutras from the north; and *le bon Dieu* had not required us to inhabit

any of its houses. Nor was the poor housemaid to blame, at the hotel of the perfect table, for the absence of her employer, and the obvious suspicion with which she regarded us. In her place, and upon such a day, we should probably have whistled for the dog ; and we shall always regret the injustice of our '*ce n'importe*' and curt departure.

There was less excuse for this because already we had found good tidings in the post-office. Both Pandora and Persephone, so we had been assured, were rosier than apples and browner than chestnuts. And there was no reason at all—but to bring us to our knees—why Coutras should have presented us with so beautiful a resting-place.

But she did, proving her greatness, and we presently found ourselves in a real garden, drinking coffee under a giant magnolia, and watching a wagon of hay being unloaded. Seen from the back, indeed, this hotel might have been some opulent farm-house—the head station of an old estancia—with its spreading courts and alleys of flowers ; and we were given *carte blanche*, if we would, to gather our fill of the last roses.

It was under this same magnolia, too, a couple of hours later, that we dined averagely well, being

waited upon by a fellow-alien in Gironde. Poor girl—she was as slow of movement as of speech and apparently cerebration, though she came from Périgord, as she told us sadly, and spoke its tongue, and would fain have been back there. But her father and mother, alas, were dead, and her little bit of land '*ce n'est pas riche, vous comprenez*,' and so she had to work here for her living forty or fifty miles from home. She may even, now we come to think of it, have been the reason for Coutras' kindness—that we four, as we took counsel, might comfort each other within her walls.

II

For now it must be confessed, if it has not become obvious, that home was calling to us also. The tiny impulse that had bidden us stray, and upon whose crest we had thus been waifs, was dying within us, was giving place to an older and stronger attraction. For man had a home before he wandered, even if Eden be only a legend, or, wandering (which was better still, perhaps), carried his home in his hands.

Slaves of progress, however, we had not done this, and what we carried instead had become nauseous to us, though we hardly realized it until,

next day, we trudged slowly into la Lustre. This must have been about half-past three, five miles west of S. André de Cubzac, whither we had journeyed by train and tram *en route* to Bourg-sur-Gironde. It was a quiet little town, slumbering wisely in the noon-day heat, as we had paused in it to buy our victuals, and admire its Romanesque church ; and it had stood sentry to a road through the very heart of vineland, with snug châteaux standing on each side of it every quarter of a mile.

But for its glare, indeed, and the almost continual, metallic winking of the vine-leaves, this road might well have seemed to us as stored with beauty as any other ; and it had certainly led us again far from the thunder of automobiles and expresses. But other and subtler hands were now plucking at our heartstrings ; and when, at la Lustre, in front of the smithy, we fell into converse with the smith, the truth that escaped from us was a revelation to ourselves no less than to him.

That has always, perhaps, been truth's way, and why God has commanded men to question Him. It was at any rate her method this afternoon. For when the worthy smith, having been told by us that we were merely journeying to see the country, advised us to climb somewhere

close at hand, whence there was an exceptionally good view of it, we unanimously assured him that for nothing on earth would we carry our bags an unnecessary yard. All that we wanted to know was the name of a respectable inn at Bourg. He rubbed his beard with a troubled smile, and evidently decided to be sure of his data.

We did not belong then—our voices betrayed us—to this particular part of France ?

No, we were English.

His eyebrows lifted.

" *Et Madame aussi ?* "

" *Et Madame aussi.*"

" *Mais—pardon—Madame est brunette.*"

That was certainly true, we admitted—and to God's handiwork three weeks' sunshine had lent an emphasis.

But he had always believed—not that he had seen any—that all Englishwomen were blonde.

We assured him that there were exceptions, and reminded him again of the hotel.

He scratched his head. Ah, the hotel, yes. He examined us once more. For in his desire to help us it was now obvious that he was in something of a dilemma. We were not, you see, as he pointed out to us, travelling *en automobile ;* but on the other hand—he was not so sure of this—we were not (idiomatically) ' down on our uppers ' ?

We looked at one another. It was a fine point. Exemption from fleas we desired at all costs ; and, to be perfectly honest, what we were craving for was the best hotel to be found in Bourg. But how, when he was so striving to be economical on our behalf, were we to be honest without ostentation ? It was an impossibility, and he summoned his colleague, a lean-faced, melancholy giant, with whom, having explained us, he explored the problem from every angle. So thorough, indeed, was the process that we could only follow it quite superficially, gathering that the smith himself was inclined to send us to some place unnamed, where for the same money we should be provided with double the quantity of food ; whereas his assistant, bearing in mind our repeated references to cleanliness, appeared to favour some less generous alternative. As the assistant remarked, however, in the last resort it all depended upon ourselves ; and it became quite clear that we were really the difficult core of the whole question. A young English *madame* with a bag—they did not possess, you see, the experience ; and it was not until we were parting that a gleam of triumph suddenly shone on the good smith's face.

"*Ah*," he shouted, "*je comprends. Vous êtes les* Sport Mans. *Oui ?*"

Sport Mans—were we? But it would have been a cruelty to deny it.

So we tramped into Bourg, aware at last of our real emotions towards our rücksacks, and dimly admitting the condition of which these were merely symptoms. Nor did we know, nor do we yet know, to which of the hotels we turned our steps, though we suspect, since its attractions were confirmed by a gentleman in gloves, that the assistant's rather than the smith's had proved the successful candidate. It did not fail us, at any rate, in the happiest accident of nomenclature. For as the Café de la Belle Étoile had shone upon the entrance to our journey, so we were received at its finish by the Hôtel de la Paix.

Hôtel de la Paix—it would not be difficult to let that stand for Bourg itself, blinking in greyness from its cliff upon another and mightier journey's end. For now once more, and for the last time, we stood again beside the Dordogne, a sheet of light, as we saw it before dinner, and with a mile of water between its banks.

And yet even so, and in actual sight of the great estuary that was awaiting it, it was still, we felt, at heart a fairy river. It had not stayed for them. It had marched to its destiny. But deep in its changing currents there still lay hidden

those ancient echoes to which we had listened above Argentat. It was still the river of dead troubadours—of dead troubadours and nightingales, though in an hour there would lie in its bosom all the traffic of Bordeaux.

Even now, indeed, islands lay in it, and ships under sail beat up its waters. But the girl that had paddled with us beneath the chestnuts had merely blossomed—she had not died. She had not died, for Youth never dies, changing its instruments only when these have waxed gross. And as we turned away from her up the hill, for all the serenity of her movement, she might have been impetuousness itself beside the decay of Bourg.

And yet Bourg had known its glories, though these had long since fled away ; and there had been a time when it stood for conquest, and was filled with the flower of eager Rome. Few towns, indeed, in the west of Europe, can have seen much more of war ; and if war were as great as song it might have rivalled the river below. But now the wars were only names, and their motives as dead as if they had never been. And it appeared to matter very little to Bourg that its walls had been besieged ten times ; or that five kings had flown their banners from them ; or that they had sheltered the most brilliant court of history. For,

as we were assured by a little traveller in American typewriters, nobody in their senses would spend a night there unless duty compelled them ; and it must be confessed that, for all its beauty, Bourg was far from clean. Even as we climbed the hill, there flowed towards us a tide of liquid noisomeness, taking the air and the street, and licking up the dust and making it horrible—while the gossiping ladies, at their front doors, gutted their fish *coram publico*, and distributed the refuse impartially upon the roadway and the pavement.

But as at La Roche Chalais, there was a terrace at Bourg, a little apart from the main town ; and, towards nine o'clock, as we sauntered out here, something of its lost dignity seemed to re-clothe it. It was a quiet terrace or *place*, sewn with trees, and with a grey parapet ; and, seated upon this, with their backs to the river, was a little party of girls. Most of these were grown up, and they were discussing their day's events ; while upon a seat, a little nearer to us, two older women sat silent. We sat down also, smoking our pipes, and watching the star-rise over the river—dove-grey now, and with a white sail tacking slowly into the mist. Then a nurse came calling between the trees for the youngest and most talkative of the girls ; and

her voluble comments about her governess gave place to *adieux* and a softer converse. As the sky deepened, too, the town grew sterner against the dropping gold of the sunset ; and, when the two women and the rest of the girls at last rose and went their way, it might have been standing there in the dusk, a Roman citadel once more. So we rose in our turn, and, leaning over the parapet, looked down into the shadows, whither our little journey had already fled, leaving behind it only its ghosts. Clever Miss Five-Spot—the eye's apple of the burly New-Yorker of our first chapter—did your spirit tell you, as you were being 'cultured' at Intellect's hub in the city of Boston, that three persons unknown had invoked it at Bourg-sur-Gironde ? Little Maurice, good *Madame* of Beynac, rosy professor, brawny smith—did you know that for half a moment you rose like wraiths from the Dordogne ? Ah no, '*C'est toi qui dors dans l'ombre, O sacré Souvenir*'—their gift to us, but not themselves, and the richest treasure of every journey.

Then abruptly, as moods will, ours changed and Sophronia drew closer ; and there was no need for me to ask her into whose eyes she had last been looking, or to what voices, the one gurgling, the other shrill, she had been listening in that velvet stillness.

"The darlings," she said, "how I want them—ever so much more, I'm afraid, than they want me."

"And Justin," I said, "what does Justin see?"

"Babies, too," she smiled, "the dear children of his brain—Broggers and poor Judy and Peter Harding; and Mr. Thompson and Berenice Chote."

But to tell the truth we had both become a little tired of Justin; and we resolved to slay him as we had resolved to slay him so many times before. For what was he, after all, but a mood to be now and then inhabited—a poor husk of a fellow, always chasing just a yard or two behind life?

So we watched him fade until presently we could see the star or two that he had been blotting, and the remote lamp of a steamer outward bound.

THE END.

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